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952

TWO BIG NOVELS

RIFLE RENDEZVOUS
by Roe Richmond

★

STONEMAN OF TOHAY VALLEY
by Zella Pearsol

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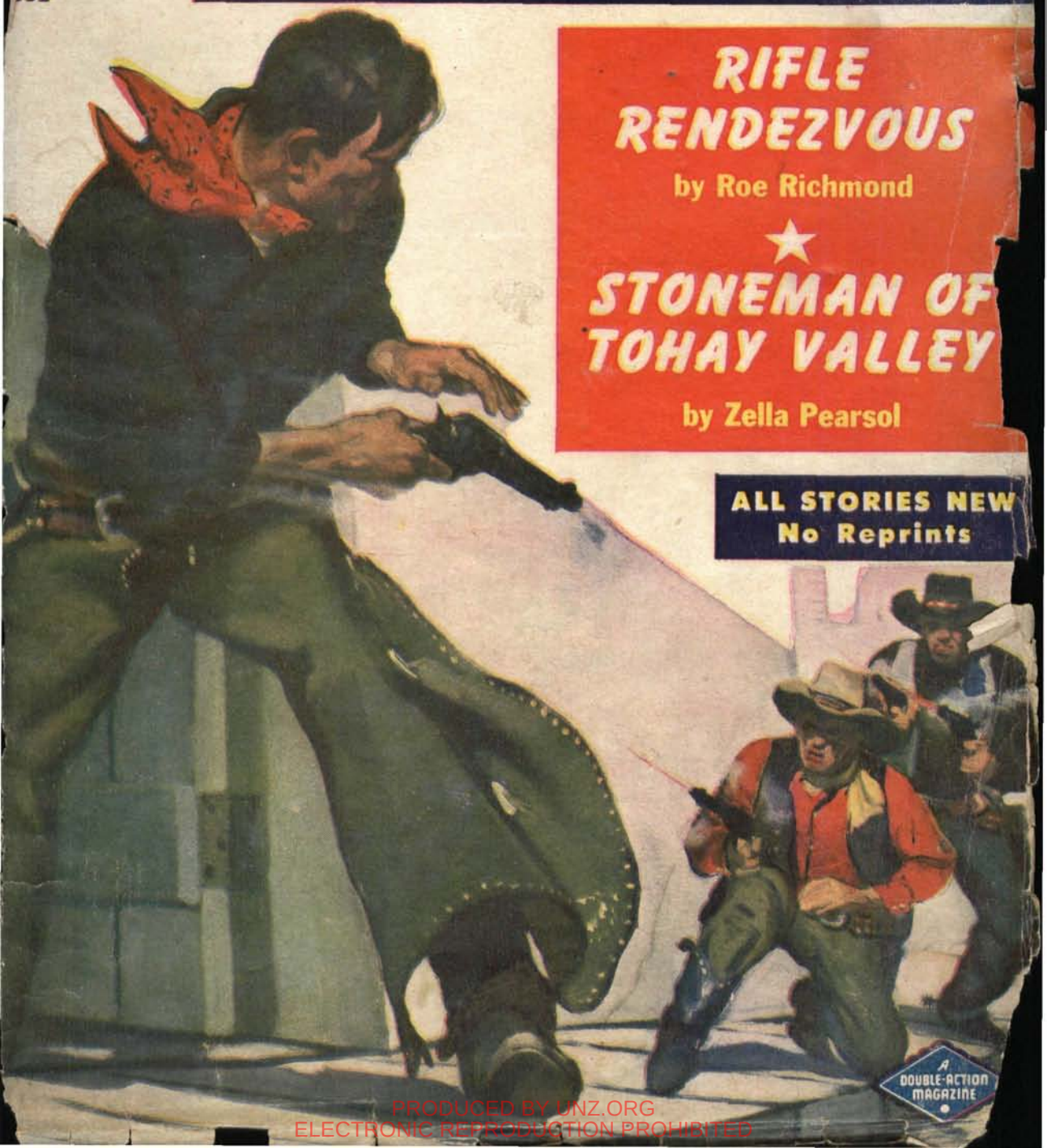
No Reprints



A DOUBLE-ACTION MAGAZINE

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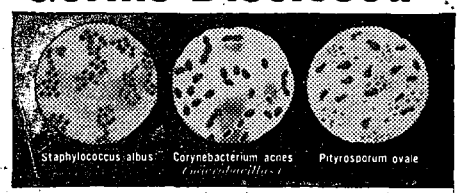
NEW MEDICAL EVIDENCE SHOWS HAIR CAN BE SAVED!

Hair-Destroying Germs Disclosed



Shown above are germ organisms believed by many leading medical authorities to cause seborrhea and dandruff that may result in hair loss and eventual baldness.

"Kill these scalp germs," say these doctors, "and you remove this cause of itchy scalp, dandruff and seborrhea, ugly head scales and unpleasant head odors – and stop the hair loss they cause."

LABORATORY TESTS PROVE GERMS KILLED BY SEBACIN

Exhaustive tests* made by a nationally-known impartial testing laboratory prove conclusively that Sebacin KILLS ON CONTACT all of the hair-destroying bacteria named by leading medical authorities as a significant cause of baldness.

Sebacin was tested on cultures of staphylococcus albus, corynebacterium acnes and pityrosporum ovale on 1-minute exposures. The test method was the F.D.A. wet filter paper method described by the United States Department of Agriculture.

Sebacin killed the test cultures on contact.

Report No. 6967, May 31, 1949

TESTED AND PROVED
by men and women all over the U. S.

"Like many others, I had very little faith in your product, but after using it I can earnestly say I was amazed, for it has done wonders for me and I assuredly recommend your product to anyone with falling hair."
A.A.—Oakland, Calif.

"My husband has used a bottle of your formula and it's done wonderful results for his scalp and hair. So I'm sending for the treatment for myself."
Mrs.V.A.—Hannibal, Mo.

"On January 28th, I received my scalp treatment and that evening I got busy with it. From the first application and up to this day I have had no itchy scalp. And I cannot comb a hair out."
R.S.—Pittsburgh, Pa.

"Have tried many hair tonics, but your treatment is the only one that has proven satisfactory."
C.B.W.—Lynchburg, Va.

"Got rid of my dandruff."
R.H.McD.—N. Kansas City, Mo.

"Had despaired of ever having normal head of hair again. Getting wonderful results from your treatment."
Mrs. M.B.—McKean, Pa.

"Stopped my scalp itch and been wonderful for my scalp."
A.R.—Belle Fourche, S. D.

"Received great relief from itchy scalp and dandruff from your treatment. I find it has stopped my falling hair."
A.K.—Randolph Field,-Texas

"My hair seems to be growing since I started using the treatment. People around here have noticed the recent results. I'll tell you it's wonderful."
Mrs. J.R.—Jacksonville, Texas

"I am sure delighted and really satisfied with the results. My dandruff and falling hair have stopped altogether."
J.T.—Stockton, Calif.

MEDICAL AUTHORITIES BLAME GERM INFECTIONS FOR COMMON BALDNESS

Washington, D. C. — New hope was offered to men and women suffering from the age-old problem of baldness, in recent testimony here by leading dermatologists.

In revealing statements, it was disclosed that specific bacteria are invariably found in seborrhea and dandruff, and may be the cause of these scalp conditions which result in baldness! The dangerous scalp bacteria named were the staphylococcus albus, the microbacillus or corynebacterium acnes, and pityrosporum ovale.

In reply to direct questions, the medical authorities agreed that:

1. At least 50% of doctors and dermatologists experienced in treating hair and scalp disorders are convinced that seborrhea and *dandruff are an important cause* of baldness.

2. This baldness may be *prevented* if seborrhea and dandruff are controlled.

3. The bacteria staphylococcus albus, the microbacillus or corynebacterium acnes, and pityrosporum ovale are invariably found when seborrhea is present and are considered to be its cause.

4. An antiseptic containing b-hydroxynaphtholene, sodium phenosulphonate, cinnamic acid and other specialized drugs *can* and *will* kill these germs.

This impressive testimony by competent medical doctors now made public for the first time, offers renewed hope for the treatment of sick scalps and the prevention of baldness.

Beware of these 5 danger signs
Neglect May Lead to Baldness

1. **Over-dryness of hair and scalp**
2. **Scalp itch**
3. **Hair loss**
4. **Dandruff or seborrhea**
5. **Excessive oiliness of hair and scalp**

Most people lose a few hairs daily. This is no cause for alarm as they are immediately replaced by the normal, healthy scalp. However, when you see any or all of the danger signs listed above, it is often a warning of scalp infection and approaching baldness.

Grateful users of Sebacin Basic Formula write that a single treatment will often eliminate annoying symptoms. By keeping the scalp clear and free of germ infection, you give nature a chance to replace hair loss.

Absolutely Nothing Known to Medical Science Can Do More To Save Your Hair!

At last offered to YOU is a revolutionary formula series based on the most recent medical knowledge of hair and scalp problems.

It's great news for those who are impatiently waiting for a treatment to help eliminate dandruff and seborrhea, scalp itch, dry hair, and to stop the hair loss *they cause.*

Read the facts on this page, the medical testimony, the laboratory report on how Sebacin kills

the hair destroyers—the microbacillus, the pityrosporum ovale, the staphylococcus albus —*on contact!* Read what grateful users from all over the United States write about the Sebacin treatment.

Then study our guarantee. You are the only judge. Remember the Sebacin home treatment must accomplish for you what it has for all the others—or the full cost of the treatment—every nickel—will be returned to you.

Maybe you're among those who have tried every kind of hair preparation until now with no success. Maybe you are skeptical as to whether Sebacin is the preparation you have been waiting for.

Either way, don't delay! You have everything to gain—at no risk. We can state without reservation that NOTHING — ABSOLUTELY NOTHING KNOWN TO MEDICAL SCIENCE CAN DO MORE TO SAVE YOUR HAIR!

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DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

Volume 19 January, 1952 Number 3

ALL STORIES BRAND NEW

Two Action-Packed Feature Novels

RIFLE RENDEZVOUS ..... **Roe Richmond** 8
On a secret mission to find an agent supposed to be trailing gun-runners, Ellner finds that his death will be secret, too!

THE STONEMAN OF TOHAY VALLEY ..... **Zella Pearsol** 64
Bitter is the trail that Dick Langford follows, seeking a heartless killer . . . and strange the destiny at its end.

Short Stories

READY FOR A COFFIN ..... **Gene Austin** 40
Jake Perkins doesn't care about dying, but he's plenty concerned about who gets his money after he's gone.

THE DEVIL'S PAYOFF ..... **James Edward Hungerford** 47
An escaped convict turns out to be a handy dodge for a killer.

LADY SHERIFF SEES RED ..... **Barbara L. Bonham** 53
Stephanie is determined to stop the stagecoach holdups, and fill out the sheriff's unexpired turn. But Red has other ideas.

True Fact Features

WAGON WHEELS ..... **J. J. Mathews** 46

THE CHIEF PLAYS CHESS ..... **Harold Gluck** 62

WAGONS INTO BOATS ..... **J. J. Mathews** 94

Robert W. Lowndes, Editor

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RIFLE RENDEZVOUS

By Roe Richmond

Ellner considered himself a free man again, and, in a sense, he was. Free of his uniform—but bound by his trust to follow Slaighter on the trail of the sinister gun-runners—follow it to the nameless grave that must now contain what was left of Slaighter!

"A FREE MAN again," breathed Ellner, stomping his high-heeled half boots, looking down with approval at the hickory shirt, buckskin vest, and checked pants, the shell belt and open-holstered gun on his right thigh. Lamplight glinted on his cropped black curls.

Cadill, casually immaculate in his blue uniform, lounged back in the chair and smiled through the cigar smoke that wreathed his handsome auburn head. "You'd do for a Bill Cody show," he conceded; "but whether or not you fool the public is dubious, Chris."

"Rusty, you're eaten with envy," laughed Ellner.

"Naturally," Cadill agreed. "You always draw the best assignments." He studied the sheen of his expensive Bascomb boots.

"Versatility is a wonderful thing."

Cadill's snort shredded the blue smoke. "My boy, with all your remarkable attributes, you were selected for one reason. Old Zillah Bible is not familiar with your face."

"His delectable niece is."

"She will not be at the agency; she remains a guest of the post." Cadill

★ Feature Novel of Deadly Intrigue ★

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sighed. "I suppose my tour of duty will be to entertain Amanda."

Ellner grinned. "My sympathy, Lieutenant; I realize what a chore that'll be for a woman-hater like yourself! But seriously, Rusty, it's hard for me to visualize a pious soul like Zillah peddling whiskey and rifles to his savage flock."

"I doubt if Bible is involved, Chris. With his head either in the clouds or bowed in prayer, it would be simple for some trader to distribute the contraband at Red Cloud."

Ellner shrugged into a soiled buckskin jacket and set a broad-brimmed flat-crowned black hat on his fine dark head. "Not bad," he murmured to the mirror, and turned again to his fellow-officer. "But Amanda is not exactly lost in day-dreams."

"Amanda is for romance rather than intrigue," Cadill said lightly. "When Amanda walks you hear violins and see wine sparkling in candlelight. When Amanda smiles—"

"Spare me," interrupted Ellner. "I am reluctant enough to leave Shelley, without listening to your poetic flights on lovely Amanda."

"Sure!" scoffed Cadill. "An extra furlough is what it amounts to, for you and Slaighter to drink Cordovan and Elkton dry."

"I'm afraid Slaighter's in trouble, Rusty."

"That big Dutchman? Perish the thought, Christopher. The Old Man's a worrier, you know; with the Comanches quiet for the time, he starts fretting about Dutch."

But neither was as carefree as he sounded, and Ellner's lean angular features were somber as he returned to the mirror. In the worn and faded range clothes he looked the part of a drifting rider, and under Sergeant Rowan's tutelage he had practiced the slouching walk and lazy drawl, as well as the quick draw. With sharp reflexes, swift coordination, and an aptitude for firearms that exceeded all his military training and experience, Ellner had been an exceptional pupil. "Born out in this country, he'd of made 'most any of 'em back water with a pistol," Rip Rowan declared.

The Comanches were supposed to be at peace with the whites, but there had been isolated outbreaks along the Paladin foothills in the past months. In each case there was evidence that the Indians were using Henry repeaters, an ominous fact when one considered that the Ordnance Board was still issuing single-shot carbines to the U.S. Cavalry. Outnumbered as the army was, with only three troops to garrison Fort Shelley, it could not afford to give away any more odds in firepower, regardless of the inferior marksmanship of the enemy.

In an effort to strike at the source of the smuggled arms, a Pinkerton agent named Slaighter, on special assignment to the army, had been investigating freighters throughout the western end of the vast Madrill Basin. Having uncovered nothing in Stockade and Cordovan City, he had gone north to Elkton. The last report from there indicated that Slaighter was on the verge of an important discovery, but since then nothing had been heard from him. Now, his patience worn thin, Major Aydelott was sending Lieutenant Ellner out in civilian guise to check on Slaighter and the situation in general.

HEAVY knuckles jarred the door and Rowan's voice rumbled, "Your mount, sir."

"Time to move out, Rusty," said Ellner, with a slow easy smile.

Cadill rose and held out his hand. "Wish I were going along, Chris."

"So do I, boy. But in some ways Amanda is the more difficult assignment; I hope she doesn't miss me too much." Ellner gripped his hand.

"I'll attend to that," Cadill promised.

Ellner stepped out under the brush ramada, and circled the rear of the adobe where Sergeant Rowan waited with a big bay gelding. The

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parade was empty and silent under the moon, the barracks across the way darkened after reveille, and officers' row was quiet except for low voices and a laugh that sounded like Amanda's. Lanterns showed in the stables, and lamps glowed from headquarters.

The saddle was high-horned and double-rigged with a rawhide riata looped on the bow, a bedroll behind the cantle, and a Henry rifle in the boot. "For once, sir, you're armed as well as a Comanche," Rowan said dryly. "I'd give a month's whiskey ration to be goin' with you. Now you can handle that Colt with the best of 'em, Lieutenant, but don't go matchin' draws with any professionals unless you have to. If it's forced on you, move first, don't wait on 'em... Their eyes'll tell you when they're goin' to make a play."

"Thank you, Sergeant, for everything; I'll try not to disgrace you."

"I'm not worried about that, sir; just take care of yourself."

"I will, Rip." Ellner shook hands with him, stepped into the leather, and walked the horse along behind officers' row toward the main gate in the stockade. The sentries were expecting him and passed him with casual salutes.

Outside the wall Ellner, accustomed to the feeling and sounds of a column at his back, was gripped with strange sudden loneliness.

He took the wagon road due east toward the Cordovan River, while the moon soared and paled to silver above the great Madrill trough. Behind him the stars sparkled over the Paladin Peaks. Before him, the immense valley was hemmed by the Shangree Hills to the south, the towering Madrills on the north. The limitless sweep of the Southwest night, thousands of barren frontier miles, dwarfed a lone man to nothing.

Ellner thought of Amanda with her bright chestnut hair and wide blue eyes. He and Cadill had been competing good-naturedly for her favors, but in his absence Rusty was certain to establish a secure claim there. Rusty Cadill had a way with women... Perhaps it was just as well; the fact that Amanda was related by blood to Zillah Bible, the freakish, almost fanatical Comanche agent, had always put a chilling restraint on Ellner. In spite of the girl's warm loveliness.

It didn't seem right without a detail from L Troop at his back. Ellner missed Sergeant Rowan with his chew of tobacco. Troopers like Dalzell and Gillway and Krantz... Lenihan, Perrigo, Schroeder, and Ulmann. He remembered with a hollow ache the ones who had died in his command, fights on the Bitterroot and the wastelands of Yoder Desert, Cathedral Towers and the Devil's Garden.

Ellner's mind turned ahead to Slaighter. Everyone at Shelley had grown fond of the big bluff Dutchman. Ellner hoped nothing had gone wrong in Elkton. Gun-runners would kill a government agent—or a soldier—as quick as anybody. Once apprehended, they had nothing more to lose.

Ellner spent the fag end of the night in the stage station by the shallows of the Cordovan—Kincaid's Ford. After breakfast, he rode north along the river toward Cordovan City.

THE ADOBE and frame buildings of Cordovan, many of them whitewashed or painted and all fitted with window-glass, had a substantial and civilized look for this country. With ranching on the plains, mining and lumbering in the mountains, Cordovan City was growing steadily, since the Apaches had been put down and the Comanches were held in temporary abeyance.

Ellner rode in at dusk, stabled his horse, and got a room in the *Pioneer Hotel*. After washing up and eating supper, he lit a cigar and strolled about town, relishing his freedom from routine duties. Visiting the various saloons, Ellner had a single drink in each and listened to the barroom gossip without learning anything of significance. He was young enough to watch the handsome, if brazen, dance hall girls with interest, but promptly

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turned down any invitations and advances they made when his tall trim figure caught their eyes.

Finally Ellner wandered toward the wagon yard of the Dikeman Freight Agency, hoping to pick up some word on Slaighter. The place was still lighted and busy in the night, with heavy wagons lumbering in to unload and others loading up to roll out. This, with the Finlaw outfit in Elkton, comprised the largest freighters in the area, but neither of them was known to have any direct dealings with the Red Cloud Indian Agency.

Finding the teamsters disinclined to talk to a stranger, Ellner sauntered to the main office in the long rambling warehouse. Leaning on a veranda post and shaping a cigarette, he surveyed the activity of the yard and decided against making open inquiries. The office door slammed open, and a voice rasped across Ellner's high slumped shoulder: "You want somethin' here, mister?"

Ellner turned and regarded his questioner, a broad compact man with a swarthy, pocked face, a broken beak of a nose, insolent eyes and mouth. Massive-shouldered and abnormally long of arm, with two low-slung guns on his thick thighs. "Why no," Ellner drawled. "Just hangin' around."

The man gestured. "Hang somewheres else, brother."

"You're the boss here?"

"I'm Spano." The name was evidently supposed to be sufficient to strike terror and terminate all discussion.

Ellner raised his rangy shoulders in a slight shrug. "Why so unfriendly?"

Spano seemed to expand with bristling anger. "Beat it, boy! I ain't got time to play games with saddlebums."

The last thing Ellner wanted was to become conspicuous, yet this kind of treatment went unbearably against his grain. Straightening off the upright, he faced Spano squarely on the shadowy porch. "Maybe I'm lookin' for a job."

"We ain't hirin'." Spano sighed and

spread his oversized hands. "Don't keep askin' for it, brother; what you wanta get hurt for? Take a walk back to the saloons."

"All right," Ellner said, smiling. "But your attitude's all wrong for a business man. You—"

Spano struck without warning, a blow of amazing speed and power. Ellner rolled his head back with it instinctively, but even so it smashed him backward off the veranda, down the short stairway. Losing his footing, Ellner lurched and fell, shoulders against the ground, head ringing numbly. Spano was following on the jump.

Rolling away and scrambling to get up, Ellner forgot all caution and everything else in his anxiety to drive back at the man who had struck him down. But Spano was right on top of him, his right leg lashing out murderously. Ellner jerked his head back enough to save himself a broken jaw and neck, but the heavy boot caught him and flung him sidewise into the dirt. Panting, moaning and half-senseless, Ellner lay there with the taste of blood and grit in his mouth, until a flame of fury seared the fog from his brain.

THIS TIME he came up so fast that Spano made no attempt to kick, but set himself to slug away as soon as Ellner was on his feet. The punch Spano threw might have beheaded him, but Ellner ducked and drove in under it, ramming the freight-man back against the low porch with jarring force. The breath jolted from his huge bulk, Spano grappled at his slender op-

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ponent with gorilla-like arms. Ellner broke away, stabbing both fists lightning-like into that pockmarked face, and Spano's big shaggy head rocked back from the swift impacts.

Spano surged forward, but Ellner slashed him back on the veranda edge, hitting with an explosive power that stunned and astonished the heavier man. Spano hung there gasping and half-blinded by blood from his gashed eyebrows. Ellner was setting himself like a trained prizefighter for the knockout, when someone climbed onto his back and pinned his arms in an iron grip, hauling him roughly backward. A giant of a man with a beard that scratched Ellner's neck like wire.

"Quite a rooster," he said. "But we can't have strangers walkin' in here and lickin' Dikeman men."

Spano stumbled ponderously forward now. "All right, Blacky; turn him loose."

"You sure you want him loose, Spano?" jeered the giant.

Spano swore savagely. "Let him go, like I said, Blackston! And watch your mouth, if you wanta keep the taste of hot lead out of it!"

Blacky laughed, freed Ellner, and sledged a cleaver-like hand across the back of his neck, bowing Ellner low beneath it. He was still reeling on spraddled legs, his head bent and his neck paralyzed, when Spano brought up a wicked uppercut. Ellner stiffened up straight and tall, his skull bursting in a roar of light, and then he was falling, the earth rushing at him as the flares faded. Blackness closed in with sudden finality, and Ellner never felt the ground beneath him...

●

Until he recovered consciousness some time later, and found himself lying in the weeds between a board fence and the slat sidewalk outside the freight yard. Ellner's neck felt broken; pain hammered incessantly within his head, and his face was crusted with blood and dust. Groping at once for his holster and his wallet, he was relieved to find both intact and unemptied. His hat, held on by the lanyard, was crumpled under his throbbing head. Ellner got up slowly and agonizingly, testing his arms and legs, checking his ribs. He wasn't crippled anyway. Apparently they hadn't put the boots to him after he was knocked out. Something to be grateful for, there—and surprised at, too.

Dusting his clothes wearily, Ellner started walking toward the lights at the center of town, pausing at a horse trough to wash his face and hands and soak his aching head. Eased and refreshed somewhat, the shame and humiliation came back to him, a pang deeper than that of lacerated flesh and bruised bone. He couldn't do anything about it at present; his hands were tied, but the time might come when he could even the score at Dikeman's. He would not forget, at any rate; Ellner would remember the names of Spano and Blackston.

Perhaps on his way back to Fort Shelley. If not then, some other time... Sooner or later he would get those two in a fair stand-up fight. It wasn't just himself that had been humbled; it was an insult to the Fifth Cavalry. Ellner wondered how Cadill and Rowan and the rest would feel about it—as if he didn't know. Fighting-mad, they'd want to ride in and turn Dikeman's into a shambles.

Ellner knew that personal issues should be irrelevant on this mission, and he didn't mean to let pride interfere in any way with his duty. But he had been ganged up on and kicked around by a bobtailed outfit of backswood bullies, and his pride would smart and rankle until the account was squared.

It occurred to him that they must have something to hide at Dikeman's, or they wouldn't be so hostile and suspicious. But, first things first—he had to push on northward to Elkton and find Dutch Slaighter. Or find out what had happened to the Dutchman.

Not caring to appear in public in his battered and disheveled state, Ell-

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ner bought a bottle in the hotel barroom and retired to his room with a tub of hot water, to cleanse and soothe his wounds, and drink himself soberly into relaxation and slumber.

Although the program was satisfactory and pleasurable, easing him considerably, the last thing Ellner thought of before drifting off to sleep was the two names branded indelibly in his memory: *Spano and Blackston, of Dikeman's freight company in Cordovan City.*

●

In the morning, Ellner rode on, the Paladins piled high on his left, the Cordovan River shining on his right, the Madrill Mountains massed majestically in front of him. Past wide rolling ranges where great herds of cattle grazed, and into the wild bleak north toward the frontier settlement of Elkton.

2

ANOTHER night had come when Chris Ellner cantered into Elkton and left his bay gelding at the livery barn. This town had a rawer and more primitive aspect than Cordovan, he observed as he carried his saddlebags to the *Mountain View House.* More log and unpainted board houses, with oiled paper instead of glass in some windows. Poorer stores, tougher saloons, and harder-looking characters on the streets. Ellner was eager to locate Slaighter, but reluctant to ask questions about him. If anything had gone awry, it wouldn't do for Ellner to identify himself as a friend of Slaighter. The best thing was to say nothing and float around till he encountered the Dutchman. Or overheard something that would lead to him.

It was too late for supper in the hotel. Ellner cleaned up in his room, had a drink at the hotel bar, and went out to eat in a restaurant. The welts and abrasions were mostly concealed by beard stubble, but Ellner's jaws were still sore and his neck felt perpetually cramped. The only compensation was in his raked swollen knuckles... After the meal, Ellner lighted a cigar and set out to see the night-life of this community. The sounds issuing from saloons, gambling emporiums and dance halls indicated that it was adequate, to say the least.

Slaighter, an inveterate lover of beer and whiskey, was not to be found in any of the bars or gaming rooms, and Ellner began to worry. Of course, Dutch might have gone to work for Shark Finlaw and been out of town on a haul. In fact, he might even be transporting arms and ammunition to Zillah Bible's Red Cloud Agency, at this very moment. But it seemed as though he would have devised some means of communicating with Shelley, if such were the case... Ellner decided to try the dance halls next.

The *Silver Horseshoe* was the largest and gaudiest, reserved for last by Ellner, who had no success at the other establishments. Nursing a drink at the bar, he searched the smoky crowded scene in vain for a glimpse of Slaighter. Either the Dutchman was gone, or something had happened to him. From the surrounding conversation, Ellner was able to recognize some of the personalities of the place.

Harry Shick, the owner, sleek-haired and dapper in black broadcloth with a fancy vest and a silk cravat, palely smiling, icy-eyed and deadly under his urbane veneer. Cardoner, his strong-armed gunman and bodyguard, was big, dark and pantherlike, with a prowling grace and arrogance, baleful yellow eyes, and a scornful mouth. Lesser gunhands were the lanky Tackel, squat Pando, and the burly Kyne. The *Horseshoe* would be a bad place to cut any capers in, Ellner reflected.

Then he noticed a young woman, alone and brooding over her glass

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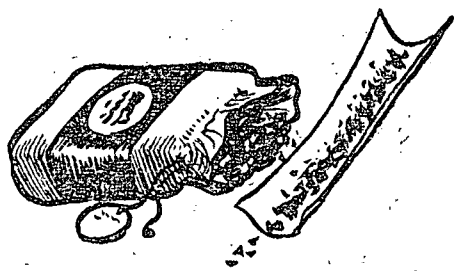
at a corner table. When men approached her, she waved them away without even glancing up, yet she was unquestionably a percentage girl employed by the house. She wore a lowcut golden gown that matched the short tousled curls on her cropped blonde head. Her bare arms, proud bosom, and what Ellner could see of her figure, were superb. She was neither beautiful nor pretty. Striking, he considered, was the word... Straight clear features formed a fine face, of the type that was generally believed to bespeak character, breeding and quality. A very odd girl to find in a frontier honkytonk.



Ellner's interest was kindled at once. He nudged a companion at the bar. "What's the matter with that girl there?"

The man looked blearily and laughed. "Nancy Dorr? Don't go around her tonight, mister; she ain't in a dancin' mood!"

"What happened to her?"

"She's mournin', mister. Mournin' the loss of a dear friend."

"Dead?" persisted Ellner.

"Deader'n a mackerel."

"Recent?"

"Two-three days ago. Drivin' freight for Shark Finlaw. Wagon rolled over on him, up in the Kiowa Pass."

Ellner went cold all over, but kept his voice casual and even: "Wonder if I might've known him? Worked with a lot of freighters."

"Big fellah, name of Slaighter. Mean anythin' to you?"

Ellner shook his head slowly. "No... No, I guess not. Maybe I could get a job there, huh?"

"Maybe," the man said. "If you need work—that bad." He turned away, finished his drink, and moved off into the noisy swirling throng.

ELLNER lifted his own glass and resumed studying the girl named Nancy Dorr. He had to meet her somehow, without arousing suspicion. They must have found out Slaighter was a government man, or acted on a hunch to get rid of him, making it look like an accident. Dutch had been on the right track, but his luck ran out... Now it was up to Lieutenant Christopher Ellner.

Cardoner prowled effortlessly toward the girl in the secluded nearby corner. He was so well-built and easy-moving that an onlooker wasn't immediately aware of his great size and strength. Bending over the table he spoke to Nancy, who responded with a negative movement of her fair head. But Cardoner wasn't so easily repulsed, he continued talking, and closed one mighty hand on the girl's wrist. She fought to free herself, but Cardoner increased his pressure until pain showed in Nancy Dorr's eyes and face.

"I'm not dancing tonight, Card," she protested. "Not with you, not with anybody."

"Come on," he said, laughing at her futile struggles. "Loosen up and you'll feel better, kid." With gentle inexorable force, Cardoner drew her upright. "Let the dead rest in peace, Nancy, we're still alive, girl."

Without thinking, Ellner set down his glass and strode in their direction, summoned by the grief and appeal in the woman's expression, revolting at the sight of a big man using his strength on a girl. Cardoner, expecting no interference, didn't bother to look around until Ellner spoke: "The lady wants to be alone, so why don't you leave her alone?"

Cardoner released Nancy's wrist and wheeled with deliberate amusement. "You don't want to horn in

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here, boy. Run along now." White teeth flashed and yellow eyes flared in his bold dark countenance.

"I want you to stop botherin' her," Ellner insisted quietly.

"Well, I'll be—!" Cardoner wagged his head. "Who are you anyway?"

"That doesn't matter."

"No, it don't," agreed Cardoner. "You got a lesson comin', whoever you are, a pistol-whippin' oughta do it."

"Don't count on that," Ellner advised.

The girl pleaded, "Please, Cardy..." But Cardoner's left hand was flashing in a smooth practiced stroke and Ellner strove to equal it with his right hand. He would have been late, he estimated, but Nancy sliced her arm down to spoil Cardoner's draw. Cardoner was snarling curses when Ellner's whipping gun-barrel clipped his skull and dropped him in a heavy, senseless sprawl on the floor.

Ellner swiveled sharply and lined his Colt on the advancing trio of Tackel and Kyne and Pando, stopping them in their tracks. Harry Shick moved into it then, waving the three gunmen away and coming on to that corner table, a quizzical grimace on his frozen face. "What's going on here anyway?"

"Card was trying to make me dance," Nancy explained. "I—I didn't want to, Harry. And this gentleman asked Card to let me alone."

"And *he* gunwhipped Card?" Schick's tone was incredulous.

Ellner smiled. "With luck."

"And a bit of assistance from me, Harry," said the girl. "I jostled Cardoner's arm, I was afraid there'd be shooting."

Shick nodded his gleaming head. "I'm glad you did, Nancy—but Card won't be." His cold eyes flicked at Ellner. "No hard feelings, stranger, but you'd better leave before Cardoner comes to. He'll want to kill you, and I can't always restrain him. You don't mind?"

"I'm on my way now, thanks," Ellner said. "I don't like trouble, but I'm kind of particular about the way women are treated."

"Admirable, I'm sure," said Shick. "You'd be a lot safer if you left town tonight, mister."

"I'll sure keep out of his way." Ellner smiled faintly, glancing down at Cardoner's big form.

Nancy held out her hand. "Thank you very much. And I hope it won't cause you any trouble in the future."

"It was nothin', ma'am." Ellner felt a scrap of paper pressed against his palm, as he shook hands with her.

ELLNER walked out of the *Silver Horseshoe* and headed for the *Mountain View House*. No one seemed to be trailing him, but he didn't look at the paper until he was in his room. It was a tag, similar to the one on his door key, bearing the number, 27. It must mean, as near as he could figure, that Nancy would meet him later in that room. It would be at the rear of the corridor, he estimated, since his own number was 20.

Ellner didn't know what he was getting into here, but it was essential to talk with Nancy Dorr, for she had been closer to Dutch Slaighter than anybody else in Elkton... He settled down to smoke and wait, well away from the door and windows of the sparsely furnished and cheerless room. Excitement and tension mounted within him, and it was not from fear of Cardoner nor dread of the hazardous future. It had more to do with meeting a girl he had never seen before this evening, but who somehow stirred him instantly to the depths.

TWENTY-SEVEN had been Slaighter's room, she told him. See, that window opened onto the roof of the rear porch, a handy back exit. Some of his things were still there, extra clothing, boots, a jacket,

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two blackened old pipes... She didn't know where to send them, or what to do with them. No, he hadn't told her much. Not because he didn't trust her, but because he was trained in security and couldn't tell anyone. She had her own ideas about what he was doing—and how and why he had died.

"What about me?" inquired Ellner. "How did you know—?"

"Dutch described you," Nancy Dorr said simply. "I was sure, when you stood up to Cardoner... Dutch said you might come looking after him."

"He have enemies here?"

"Not that I know of—not personal. Dutch was well liked generally. Popular with both Shick's and Finlaw's outfits. And there's no love lost between the two crews."

Nancy was still grieving, Ellner comprehended. No tears, no hysterics, but the pain and loss were deep in her... It put him at a certain disadvantage, made him feel awkward and uncomfortable. Ellner had been fond of Slaighter and shared her bereavement, but not knowing what Nancy's relationship with Dutch had been caused him some unease.

The bleak room was transformed by her presence, the faint heady fragrance of her. She was even more desirable than Ellner had anticipated. He walked restlessly about touching Slaighter's pitifully few possessions here and there, caressing the worn saddlebags with the toe of his boot, thinking how little was left of a man after he died. Crushed to death in a lonely mountain passage. It was worse than dying in battle, the cause open and explicit... It made everything seem empty and bitter and meaningless. And Ellner was quite apt to die in the same obscure and pointless manner.

He glanced at her fine profile and saw the short rumpled curls shimmer golden in the lamplight. What was a woman like that doing in a cheap dance hall on the ragged outer edge of civilization? Ellner wanted to take her in his arms, hold and comfort her, taste the sweet ripeness of her mouth... He shaped another cigarette and lighted it from the lamp chimney.

"I have no right to ask, but..." His voice faded.

"Well?" She looked straight at him, and he couldn't tell whether her eyes were gray or green or a kind of blue. "It's all right. I feel as if we had known one another—before."

"Yes, it does seem that way—Nancy. I—I can't help wondering if you were in love with Dutch?"

She moved her head ever so little from side to side. "No-o, it wasn't love, Chris. We liked one another, we had fun together, we were wonderful friends. I was lonely and miserable here, until Dutch came... That's all, I think. Very good friends—for such a short time."

AFTER an interval of silence, Ellner asked: "Do you think I can get a job with Finlaw?"

"Do you *have* to, Chris?"

He nodded. "Yes, it's the only way."

"They might hire you, when they hear that you gunwhipped Cardoner. But they'll watch you close, knowing it was over me."

"I'll have to try anyway," Ellner said.

"Getting on with them's the only thing that will save you from Cardoner," Nancy mused. "But it may be going from bad to worse."

"Who are Finlaw's big guns?"

The girl sighed. "There are so many of them, Chris... Hocknod is the big man, who breaks men up with his bare hands. For gunfighters there are Harrup, Malkin, Ponsford, Stonetsch, Veysey—to name a few."

Ellner laughed softly. "That's enough, for a start."

"Oh, why don't they send the cavalry in and wipe them all out?" Nancy Dorr asked wearily.

Ellner started, in spite of himself, but the girl looked guileless. "No evidence yet, Nancy; the army can't

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move until guilt is clearly established, I suppose."

"Isn't that always the way Right handicaps itself in combatting Wrong and Evil?"

Ellner stared at her. It was strange philosophy to hear from a hurdy-gurdy entertainer, but he was convinced that Nancy was the only one of her kind. They looked into one another's eyes, losing themselves there, forgetting what they had been talking about. An overpowering force pulled them together without volition. It was the most natural thing in the world to wrap their arms about each other and let their lips meet, crush and cling...

They were still embraced, when hard knuckles hammered the door panel and Cardoner's voice rasped through the wood: "Nancy? Are you there, Nancy? Open up! It's me, Card."

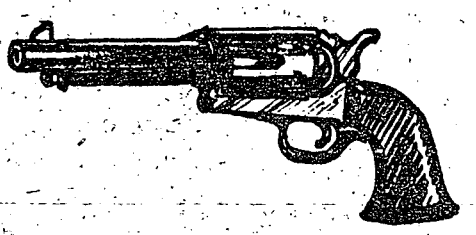
Terrified, Nancy pointed to the back window, as they broke apart and stood rigid and silent. Ellner shook his head, but her gestures became more insistent. "Please, please, Chris!" she framed the words with her red mouth. Ellner nodded at last and tiptoed to the window, as Nancy got up and began walking around, raising her voice to call: "Just a minute, Card. I was lying down."

Cardoner shook the doorknob impatiently, while Ellner slid up the window, slipped out onto the dark back roof, and lowered the sash again. Creeping to the outer edge, he swung over, shinned down the corner pole to the kitchen porch, and dropped lithely to the backyard. Things were happening too fast for him tonight. He could still taste the sweet fire of Nancy's mouth, and her perfume was rioting in his senses. Ellner didn't like running away from Cardoner, or any other man; perhaps it was the smart thing to do, but he resented it.

Ellner started walking through shadows toward the street, and a taunting voice came from behind him: "Reach up, Romeo, or we'll let you have it in the backbone!"

Ellner lifted his hands with slow reluctance. "Turn around now, so we can see your pretty map." Ellner wheeled and saw the husky Kyne grinning there, gun in hand. The small chunky man beside him was flat-nosed, buck-toothed, and empty handed. "Get his gun, Beaver," instructed Kyne. "I'm goin' to work him over a mite with the barrel; just cut and soften him up some for Cardy."

Beaver advanced warily, circling to leave Kyne a clear field of fire, but a gruff voice from a cottonwood across the passage halted him: "Hold on here, boys. I aim to even the odds a little."



KYNE'S barrel glimmered as he swung it toward that tree, and Beaver clawed for his holster. Flame leaped roaring across the driveway, shattering the late-night stillness before Kyne could trigger. Kyne swayed backward, forward, and his pistol exploded into the gravel as he pitched headlong on his face.

Beaver's weapon was coming up when Chris Ellner threw his .44 clear and thumbed off a shot, the gun blazing and lifting hard in his hand. The slug slammed Beaver sideways into the wall of the hotel, spun him off the clapboards, and dropped him flat on his back behind Kyne's bootheels. Neither of them was stirring, as the reports rolled echoing away.

"Come with me, friend," the gruff voice ordered, and Ellner glimpsed a broad portly bulk as he sprang after his benefactor. They fled through the backlot and into a side alley, that evolved into a whole labyrinth of odorous dark passageways and rubble-

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strewn yards. "Far enough," panted the fat man, slowing to a walk. "What was they on you for, son?"

"I belted Cardoner with my gun barrel earlier in the evenin'."

"You did?" The fat man chortled with satisfaction. "Well now, I'm sure glad I dealt myself in back there. Saw them coyotes skulkin' around, and figured they was up to no good."

"I'm much obliged, mister. But why—?"

"Never liked two on one, and never liked dance-hall gunnies. Reason enough, ain't it, sonny? Saved you a goin' over anyhow. My name's Budworth, teamster for Finlaw, just call me Bud."

"Christopher, Chris for short," said Ellner, shaking hands with him. "You think they're dead?"

Budworth shrugged massively. "Doubt it. Too ornery to die that easy. Not that anybody'd miss 'em—except Harry Shick. You better bunk with me tonight, Chris. Nobody'll bother you in the Finlaw bunkhouse."

"Thanks again, Bud. I wonder if I could get a job with your outfit?"

"I reckon," Budworth said. "We lost a man a few days back. The Shark'll put you on, when he hears about this night's work. Just pistol-whippin' Cardoner would've done it probably; you ain't got a thing to worry about, son."

"Left my gear in the hotel," Ellner said, thinking: *My worries are only beginning, Bud, if you but knew it.*

"We'll send a boy after 'em," said Budworth. "Simmer down and ride easy, son. Ol' Uncle Bud'll take care of everythin'. You're the luckiest younker in the whole Madrill, to fall in with this ol' reprobate. I like the looks of you and the way you handle a six-gun, and anybody that bends a barrel over Cardoner's skull is ace-high with your Uncle Bud!"

"I hope those men don't die, Bud," muttered Ellner, recalling others who deserved it more. The murderers of Slaighter, for example.

Budworth chuckled. "So do I, son. Like nothin' better'n to let 'em have it all over again! Chris, don't waste no pity on them two animules."

They went on to the extensive layout of the Finlaw Freight Company, and Budworth found Ellner a bed near his own in the long bunkhouse, where scores of men were already snoring. Ellner realized he was fortunate to get an inside break this early in the game, but it was hours before he fell asleep in that strange crowded environment. His brain, racing with kaleidoscopic thoughts of Nancy and Slaighter, Cardoner and the rest of Shick's men, Spano and Blackston, Amanda and Cadill, would not let him rest.

3

IN THE morning they learned that Kyne was dead, but the man called Beaver would probably recover from his wound. The town marshal, writing it off as another chapter in the Finlaw-Shick feud, refused to conduct anything more than a cursory token investigation. Cardoner was said to be gunning for a long lean stranger with curly black hair worn short.

Budworth took Ellner to breakfast in the cookshack, and was conducting him toward the front office to interview Finlaw, when a thin weasel-faced man named Veysey drew Bud aside and dispatched him on some other duty. Veysey jerked a contemptuous thumb at Ellner: "Come on, I'll bring you to the boss. But I'm tellin' you, he's in a helluva mean temper this mornin'."

The outer office was full of rock-faced men with double-holstered gun belts and a tough insolent swagger about them. "New recruit," grinned Veysey, and named off some of the gunmen in a kind of mock introduc-

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tion. Hocknod was a brute-faced giant with innocent china-blue eyes. Ellner got only a blurred impression of the others, noting that Malkin was a clean-cut blond boy, Ponsford a dude in flashy clothes, and Harrup tall, wire-thin and hatchet-faced. Stonetsch had a solid blocky build, sullen square-jawed features that might have been hacked out of granite, and light, almost colorless eyes. The rest were lost in the shuffle, but Ellner knew this was as wicked a crew as he had ever seen, including blood-mad Apaches and Comanches on the warpath. Worse, because these were white and supposedly civilized.

In the main inner office, Shark Finlaw sat behind his desk chewing a twisted cheroot, bald head palely agleam in the morning grayness. He was well-named, Ellner thought, forehead and chin receding from the cruel hooked nose and wide down-turned mouth, eyes cold and malevolent.

"Christopher," announced Veysey. "The one that tangled with Shick's boys last night."

"So?" said Finlaw, eyes boring into Ellner. "What do you want?"

"Nothin' but a job."

"Why should I give you a job?" demanded Finlaw. "You're a trouble-maker; I've got troubles enough already. Get out, boy, don't waste my time."

"But Budworth'll vouch for me," Ellner said, in desperation. "Bud said you'd put me to work."

"The fat man doesn't run this organization. Good morning, mister." Finlaw waved a long white hand in dismissal.

"Just give me a chance," Ellner said, hating himself for having to plead with this repulsive specimen of an overlord.

Finlaw looked him up and down with immeasurable scorn. "You aren't tough enough for this outfit, boy. Take him away, Veysey."

Ellner whirled as Veysey reached for his arm. "Keep your hands off me!" he warned.

Veysey grinned like a rodent. "Want me to throw down on him, Boss?"

"No, I don't want any unnecessary gunplay. I'll just have him heaved out."

"Who's goin' to do it?" asked Ellner.

Shark Finlaw smiled his down-curved smile. "Hocknod!" he called. "Come in here." The hulking man shuffled in from the outer room, his mild blue eyes blinking in the craggy face. "Throw him out, Hock," ordered Finlaw, waving negligently at Ellner.

Hocknod grinned, his eyes brightening childishly. "Why sure, Boss." he advanced like a gigantic urchin reaching for a new toy.

ELLNER STOOD perfectly motionless until those monstrous hands were almost upon him. Then he seemed to explode into a terrific one-two motion, lashing his left to that thick corded throat, ripping his right low and deep into the abdomen. Hocknod uttered a strangled retching groan and doubled in gut-torn agony, gasping for air and groping blindly. Ellner stood off and laced him left-right, left and right again, pouring all he had into the punches.

Huge head bobbing violently, Hocknod reeled back across the office, his enormous shoulders crashing the wall. Braced there, he made a frenzied effort to fight back, but Ellner drilled him low in the body once more. As Hocknod bent in the middle, Ellner brought both fists whipping up into that bloody face. Lifted upright and backward, Hocknod's head thumped the wall with resounding force. Eyes glazed and breath sawing in choked sobs, Hocknod shambled forward in a leaning, lurching trot. Ellner clubbed the back of his neck with a hammer-like blow. Hocknod fell face down and lay there, gagging, bleeding and squirming.

Veysey had his gun drawn, ready to strike Ellner from behind, but

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Shark Finlaw spoke sharply: "Put that up, Veysey, and leave him alone! I always knew that big blubber couldn't lick a man who'd stand up to him. You, Christopher—put the boots to him, if you want to."

Ellner shook his head and rubbed his raw aching knuckles. "I'm satisfied."

"He's not licked yet, you know," said Finlaw; "better finish him, or he'll kill you, boy."

Hocknod was up on hands and knees, the blood spattering widely as he shook his large head. Ellner looked down at him and gestured open-handed. "I don't want to hit him again."

"Well, somebody's got to!" Shark Finlaw came out of his chair and around the desk with surprising speed. The gun seemed to leap into his hand. With cold cruel precision and force, Finlaw chopped the barrel across the giant's sagging head. Hocknod slumped unconscious on the boards, a dark pool spreading under his battered face. "There," said Finlaw. "Drag him outside, Veysey. Bring him to, and tell him to lay off this boy. I've changed my mind; if Budworth's out there, send him in."

Veysey hauled Hocknod to the doorway, where other hands laid hold of him. Finlaw resumed his seat, motioning Ellner into a chair before the desk. "I make mistakes occasionally," admitted Finlaw. "Usually early in the morning, when I'm in a bad mood. This damned insomnia is ruining me." He smiled that inverted smile. "Well, Christopher, perhaps you are tough enough for us, after all."

"I hope so," Ellner said. "I sure need the job."

"Do your work, mind your own business, and you'll get along all right. I expect my employees to follow instructions to the letter—and never ask questions. In return, I offer them protection. From whatever they need to be protected from. For instance, Harry Shick's boys won't molest you, as long as you're on my payroll."

Ellner nodded gravely.

"You don't care where you go, or what you haul—do you?"

"No, sir."

"That's fine," Finlaw said. "I don't like my men getting particular—and nosey. I'll send you out with Budworth. He's a good man to break in with."

BUDWORTH appeared in the doorway then, broad red face beaming and jovial, his gross bulk filling the entire entrance. "Guess I don't have to tell you, Boss, how good this boy is!" He ambled in and clapped Ellner on the shoulder, chewing his tobacco with satisfaction.

"Take him over the Hump on your regular run, Bud," said Finlaw. "I know he can handle his fists, and I hear he can use a gun. You find out what he can do with horses and a wagon. And don't lay over and get drunk in Orestes this time, Budworth."

Budworth looked hurt. "I told you, Boss, I had a broken axle last trip."

"Well, don't break another," warned Shark Finlaw. "You can tell Christopher about the pay and found, and if he needs an advance get it from the paymaster when Chris signs up. That's all, boys."

In the outer room, Ellner noticed that the gunhands regarded him with more interest and respect, and the smiling blond Malkin remarked: "Now that Fatso's got a bodyguard, he can stay drunk all the time."

"Drunk or sober I can take any of you young punks," Budworth replied easily. "And don't ever forget it."

"Gettin' cocky," drawled Malkin, "since he bushwhacked a dance hall tinhorn."

Budworth laughed at them. "Trouble with you boys, you ain't shot off nothin' but your mouths for so long

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that a gunshot'd spook you like jackass rabbits!"

●

Outside in the yard, Budworth beamed at Ellner with almost paternal fondness and pride. "I would have to miss that hoorawin' you handed to Hocknod, Chris. But we'll have many a more jamboree together, you and me."

"I fouled him," Ellner confessed.

Budworth's laughter boomed in delight. "How can you foul a critter like that, son? He's bigger and tougher'n a bull buffalo."

"And dumber," added Ellner.

Budworth hooted in agreement, and mauled him happily. "Coupla weeks I'm due for a bonus run, and I'll try to get you in on it, Chris."

"What's that, Bud?"

"I don't rightly know—or care," Budworth said. "All I know is it pays off real handsome. We make a good team, we might draw it together."

"I hope so, Bud," said Ellner, thinking that he could make a very good guess as to what that bonus run was. A cargo of Henry rifles and .44-.40 ammunition to the Red Cloud Agency of Zillah Bible.

●

IN TWO WEEKS Ellner had learned a lot about the Finlaw Freight Company—yet really nothing that he was after. But without any actual evidence, he was convinced that this outfit ran guns to the Comanches. And positive that Stonetsch had killed Dutch Slaighter in Kiowa Pass, at the command of Shark Finlaw. There was no talk about it, even from Budworth, but Ellner knew that Stonetsch had been riding with the Dutchman at the time of the so-called accident. Somehow they had become suspicious of Slaighter, enough to warrant doing away with him.

Ellner lived in the company bunkhouse at Elkton, having transferred his gear from the *Mountain View House* and his bay gelding from the livery barn. He was accepted by his associates, thanks to Budworth's sponsorship and his own friendly manner, although Hocknod, Veysey and Stonetsch harbored some animosity toward him. There had been no trouble as yet with Cardoner and the other Shick hands, for Ellner never appeared in town unaccompanied by his fellow-workers. He couldn't afford to take the chance of having Cardoner bring his mission to an untimely end, but it was annoying to hear constantly that Cardoner never left off threatening or branding him a coward in public.

Nancy Dorr had left the *Silver Horseshoe*, and moved in with an elderly widow, who owned a neat comfortable adobe house at the edge of the settlement. Ellner spent his free evenings there with her, and their mutual attraction had flowered swiftly into something richer, deeper and more meaningful. It was love, without any doubt, and Ellner wanted to marry her—he thought. Even though her past status as a dance-hall girl troubled and nagged at him, and Nancy made no attempt to explain or justify herself.

On the other hand, Ellner hadn't revealed his true identity and purpose here to Nancy, but he often felt that the girl knew all about him and his assignment. This reserve on either side inevitably caused a slight breach between them, marring the happiness of their moments together.

When Ellner arrived this night, his lean bronze face and level brown eyes were alight, and Nancy knew that something had happened, as she lifted her mouth for his kiss. Mrs. Owen left them alone in the parlor as usual, declaring that she always preferred to sew and putter around in the kitchen. Seated comfortably on the sofa, Nancy looked questioningly at him.

"Bud and I are going out on that bonus haul tomorrow," Ellner told her, boyish in his eagerness.

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"Then we may not see one another again, Chris," she said.

"What makes you say that, Nancy?"

"I just have that feeling. You are going to be in great danger, Chris—as Dutch was."

Ellner laughed gently. "I'll come through it, Nancy."

"Even if you do, you won't be coming back to Elkton."

He regarded her steadily. "You're a wise girl, Nancy. How do you know so much about me? And everything in general?"

She smiled wistfully. "I don't; I have to guess about you, Chris. And you have to wonder about me. It keeps a barrier between us; don't you think it's time to break it down?"

"I can't explain, until this is over. Why don't you meet me at Fort Shelley?"

"Would a former dance-hall girl be welcome in officers' row?"

Ellner stiffened. "Who cares about officers' row?"

"Still guessing, Chris," she murmured. "I've mailed messages for you to the post. And I've known quite a few army men, here and there."

Ellner raised his wide shoulders. "Meet me at Shelley, and I'll give you the whole story, Nancy."

"You want me to come, just as I am? Without any explanation on my part?"

"Yes," he said. "Sure, I do."

Her smile was inscrutable. "All right, Chris. I'll take the stage to Fort Shelley. But I won't hold you to anything there."

"You won't have to, Nancy," he said, laughing. "But someday you'll tell me why you were masquerading as a honkytonk entertainer."

"It does bother you, doesn't it?" She was abruptly serious.

"A little," Ellner admitted. "But I'd never let you go, Nancy."

"Ah, that's what I want to hear, Chris." She leaned close, her face uplifted and radiant, and Ellner lowered his lips firmly upon the warm fullness of hers . . .

Later, she asked: "You go south tomorrow?"

"As far as Cordovan City. After that, I don't know."

"Southwest into the Paladin foothills? I'm guessing again, Chris."

Ellner nodded somberly. "Perhaps your hunch parallels mine, Nancy."

THEY HAD coffee and sandwiches, and Ellner gave her another sealed envelope bearing the pre-arranged address of a fictitious civilian at Fort Shelley.

"If you leave tomorrow you can carry this in person," he suggested. "It wouldn't mean much to anyone who intercepted it, Nancy, but it's highly imperative that it gets to the post. As soon as possible."

"Where will I find this person, Chris?"

"At Major Aydelott's. The commanding officer's quarters."

"I think I'll take the stage tomorrow," Nancy Dorr mused. "I've had enough of this town, in spite of Mrs. Owen's kind hospitality. I'll deliver it myself, Chris. When do you expect to get there?"

"By the end of the week probably. Four or five days."

"Be careful, Chris," she said earnestly. "Please be awfully careful."

"I will, I'll be all right, Nancy." Ellner kissed her farewell, called good night and thanks to Mrs. Owen, and left the adobe to cut across to the freight yard in the warm langorous night. He'd need all the sleep and rest he could get, with that big ordeal looming ahead of him. For the remainder of this week, he'd be riding elbow to elbow with death.

●

Halfway to the bunkhouse, it occurred to Ellner to send a whimsical verbal message to Lieutenant Rusty Cadill. Smiling to himself, he turned and retraced his course toward the trim little adobe house on the nearby

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outskirts. The moon hung golden above the Madrills in the east, and the Paladin Peaks glittered in starlight on the western horizon. Senses sharpened by impending danger and strife, Chris Ellner felt wonderfully alive, fit and young, keen as a saber.

In the alley opposite the Owen home, he came to a sudden shocked halt. Nancy was on the leanto porch, lamplight glimmering on her golden hair, and there was somebody with her, a man. The big graceful figure of Cardoner, towering over the girl... Ellner blinked incredulously, scarcely able to credit his vision in this instance. But there they were, standing close together in the dimness, intent on one another and their conversation.

Madness roared up in Ellner, clawing his throat tight even as he clawed at his gun-handle, but he forced it down with a tremendous effort, standing rooted until the wildness ebbed slowly out of him and sanity returned. He couldn't permit a private issue to jeopardize the entire project. This was no time to risk a fight with Cardoner. Let him have the girl; she was no good anyway... The message wouldn't mean anything to that big strutting dance-hall bully. But it might to the shrewd slick Harry Shick, if he ever got hold of it.

Ellner thrust his Colt back into the leather, and wiped his sweating palms on his trousers. The madness was gone, but the bitter taste stayed in his mouth, the aching knot in his throat, and inside he was hollow and desolate. He'd been a fool all right, an utter damned fool. Nancy Dorr had probably marked Slaighter for death, and now she was putting the finger on Ellner. He didn't know what her game could be, but it was a rotten one.

Slowly Ellner retreated through the alley, and started walking once more toward the freight agency. The beauty had gone out of the night, the vital life and spirit from his rangy frame, and Ellner moved like an old tired man now, head bowed and broad shoulders drooping.

Well, he still had a job to do, a big job, and that was all that mattered. To hell with Cardoner and Nancy Dorr. They couldn't stop him, nothing was going to stop him... Ellner thought of the troopers and white settlers he had seen shot down with Henry repeaters, and a murderous fury grew in him against Shark Finlaw and all his hired hands.

Sure, I've been double-crossed, thought Chris Ellner. *But what more can you expect of a cheap little dance hall chippie like that?*

His mind turned to Amanda Ward. There was a real lady. Nancy could look and act the part, but with her it was all surface, purely superficial. You don't find women of quality in frontier barroms. Comparing Nancy to Amanda was like comparing Harry Shick to Lieutenant Cadill... Ellner writhed inwardly, to think of what a simple naive dupe he had been, and how Nancy and Cardoner must be laughing at him.

4

THEY pulled out of Elkton in the dank gray mists before sun-up, with Budworth at the reins and Chris Ellner riding guard beside him. The big hooded wagon, not heavily loaded, rattled easily along after the four horses, which the fat man handled like one. They were well on the road when the sun rose above the distant Capstones, and the dense fog was dissipated along the Cordovan River as light flooded the vast Madrill Basin. In a few hours it became scorching hot, the animals lathered and the men sweating in their shirtsleeves.

The stop-over at Cordovan City had Ellner worried. Budworth said they were to leave this rig at Dike-

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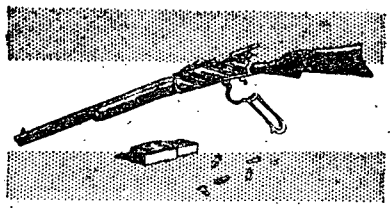

man's, and take out another and heavier-laden wagon with a six-horse team in the morning.

"What are we haulin', Bud?" asked Ellner.

Budworth spat tobacco juice. "Don't ask me, Chris. I don't know, and I don't want to know. The bonus pay's enough to shut my mouth from askin' questions."

"But where do we go from Cordovan?"

"I ain't supposed to tell you—yet."

"A helluva lot of mystery," grumbled Ellner.

"Don't fret none over it, son," Budworth grinned. "Just leave it to your ol' Uncle Bud."

●

That afternoon Ellner told him about his brawl with Spano and Blackton. "If they see me at Dikeman's, Bud, it's liable to bring on a small war; maybe I ought to drop off in town."

Budworth wagged his graying head. "They're expectin' two of us, Chris, and they'll want to see two of us. They're a bad pair, that Spano and Blacky, but they won't start nothin' when they see you workin' for Shark Finlaw. Maybe they won't be around anyway."

It was twilight when they rolled into Cordovan and turned toward the freight yard of Dikeman's Agency. Ellner shifted nervously on the seat, loosening his revolver in the holster, fondling the carbine across his knees. Spano had been suspicious of him before, and he might challenge his presence on such a vital run. Ellner would have to kill, if necessary, to check the man's tongue. Recalling his treatment at Spano's hands, it shouldn't be too hard to do either.

Reining up and snubbing the ribbons, Budworth bawled for hostlers as he set the brake and clambered down with a groan. Ellner swung lightly to earth and stood with the carbine crooked under his arm. "Wait here while I check in, Chris," said Budworth, lumbering off in the direction of the office. Ellner was alertly on the watch for Spano and Blackston, while the stablemen unharnessed, but saw no sign of them in the milling dusty swirl of activity, splashed with lantern-light.

Budworth returned shortly. "All right, kid. Your friends don't seem to be in camp. Let's go get a drink a meal and some decent rooms to sleep in. Tomorrow's apt to be a real hard day."

They were eating supper in a restaurant, when Chris Ellner started and reached for his gun, then relaxed and eased back into the chair.

"Whatsamatter, son?" inquired Budworth. "See a ghost—or Spano?"

Ellner shook his dark curly head. "Could've sworn I saw Cardoner and Tackel outside that window, Bud."

Budworth chortled. "Naw, they never get this far away from that *Silver Horseshoe,* Chris."

THEY SLEPT in the *Pioneer Hotel,* turning in early and getting up to breakfast in the kitchen before dawn. The town was still slumbering, for the most part, as they hiked out to Dikeman's in the chill shifting mists from the river, shivering in their jackets. Despite the early hour, there was life in the warehouse, stables and cookshack, and Budworth pointed out their covered wagon, already tautly packed with six horses in the traces.

"All set and ready to roll, boy," Budworth said cheerily, saluting a man in the office doorway. "There's the high sign. We're off, son."

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They mounted to the seat, Budworth unfurling the reins and whip while Ellner checked his Henry repeater, placing it within easy reach in the boot. Budworth was about to set his team in motion with a crack of the whiplash, when two men came marching out of the office toward the wagon. The broad pockmarked Spano, and big brown-bearded Blackston, their eyes fixed on Ellner and their hands raised in a stop signal.

"Who you got with you there, Bud?" demanded Spano, as they halted on Ellner's side. "We've seen that snooper before."

"Christopher, my regular partner," Budworth growled. "What's eatin' on you boys?"

"We don't like the looks of him, Bud," said Spano.

"It's our fightin' cock, sure enough," Blackston remarked.

"Well, speak to Shark Finlaw about it," Budworth advised caustically. "He'd probably appreciate your interest in his business! Me, I just wanta get rollin' on schedule."

"Hellfire, Bud!" protested Spano. "You wanta put a rope on all our necks? Don't you know that jasper there is some kinda gov—"

Chris Ellner took off in a reckless flying leap, high over the wheel and straight down at Spano, drawing his gun in mid-air. Spano tried to dodge, but Ellner's boots caught him squarely in the chest, driving him over backward. Blackston was drawing, but Ellner's gun barrel slashed across his head, beating him into the dirt, half-senseless.

Spano landed on the back of his neck, legs high in the air, sliding and thrashing in the gravel. Ellner lighted awkwardly on his feet and fell, twisting and rolling. Spano scrabbled to his knees, pistol leveled at Ellner, but Chris fired first from a prone position on the ground. Spano reared back, his gun flaming skyward. Ellner hammered another shot into that wide shuddering bulk. Spano stretched sideways, kicked briefly, and was still in the skirling dust.

Blackston, swaying on all fours, recovered enough to line his weapon at the rising Ellner, but Budworth lashed out with his bullwhip, cutting Blacky's wrist to the bone and tearing the gun from his numbed fingers. Snarling in his beard, Blackston reached left-handed for his other revolver, that lash still wrapped wickedly about his bleeding right wrist. Budworth snaked him off balance with the whip. Ellner booted the gun out of Blacky's left hand, and gave him another stroke with the steel barrel. Blackston grunted and collapsed, loose and motionless, his cinammon-colored beard in the dirt.

"Come on, kid!" yelled Budworth. "Before the whole pack hits us!"

Men were pouring from the office and warehouse, stables and sheds, cookshack and bunkhouse, some carrying rifles and others waving pistols. Ellner vaulted to the seat, knowing that they'd never get that wagon out of there... At that moment there was a hurtling rush of hoofs, and a small cavalcade swept into the yard at a gallop, passing the freight dray and pulling up before the advancing Dikeman forces. Among others Ellner recognized Malkin, Harrup, Ponsford and Stonetsch, wondering at their opportune appearance.

Stonetsch was haranguing the opposition: "Your boys started it, and you're lucky they aren't both dead. Just a personal fight, nothin' between our two outfits. Stand where you are and let that wagon haul out of here, and nobody else'll get hurt."

THE DIKEMAN men stood, more or less without leadership since Spano was dead and Blackston unconscious, none of them caring to match shots with these notorious gunhands from Shark Finlaw's organization. Budworth set his team in motion, and

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the heavy wagon rumbled toward the gate. Malkin dropped back alongside the vehicle, blond and smiling as usual.

"We just happened to be ridin' through, boys, and thought we'd check you out. Maybe a good thing, huh? Reckon you'll get along the rest of the way fine."

"Much obliged to you, Mal," said Budworth. "It looked kinda bad for a minute. Probably the kid and I could've shot our way out, but it's just as well you saved us the trouble."

Malkin laughed aloud, merry and boyish. "You're welcome, Bud. Especially since you're so grateful! Pleasant journey, friends." He turned back to rejoin his companions in the enclosure, where the Dikeman employees were picking up Blacky and Spano.

Outside on the road south of Cordovan City, Chris Ellner glanced at the corpulent tobacco-chewing driver. "It looks like we aren't travelin' alone, Bud."

"I don't know, son. Maybe we need some help. We sure wouldn't be travelin' at all, if them boys hadn't showed back there."

"That's true," Ellner agreed. "I was afraid that Spano would start somethin' with me."

"Seemed to think you was a spy—or somethin'," Budworth mused. "Well, you took care of 'em pretty neat, Chris. Reckon you'll do to have along, boy."

"Thank you, Bud," said Ellner gravely. It complicated matters to know that they might have a hidden escort of Finlaw riders all the way. It meant that Chris couldn't take the wagon from Bud, and drive it straight into Shelley... Well, nothing to do but ride it out and play the cards as they came.

When they branched westward around midday, away from the river toward the Paladin foothills north of the fort, Ellner knew for certain they were heading for the Red Cloud Agency.

●

LATE IN the afternoon, they had left the undulant plains country behind and were winding over a broken wooded terrain into the reddish glare of the lowering sun. Here the sunblasted landscape was carved erratically with ravines and arroyos, moulded with sharp ridges and knobby hills, slashed with deep narrow canyons. *Ideal country for an ambush,* thought Ellner. It was thicketed in brush and scattered with boulders, shaded by scrub oak and cedar, ash, juniper and jack pine. Wild and uninhabited, with here and there a burnt-out cabin or a charred cellarhole.

This was still Comanche territory, unsafe for white settlers. And would remain so, as long as cargoes such as they hauled were transported to the Indians. Ellner marveled at the greed and base perfidy of his fellow men.

Before them the blazing ball of the sun neared the Paladin pinnacles, and behind them shadows stretched ever longer. Coolness was a blessed relief, after the fierce blinding heat of afternoon. At this point the road curved through a narrow defile, blue and quiet with shadows. All of a sudden horsemen appeared ahead of them, fanned out to block the pass from wall to wall. Six of them, Ellner perceived, and four of them he knew: Harry Shick and big Cardoner, the lank Tackel and stocky Pando... *So this is the way Nancy Dorr chose to betray me,* thought Ellner, looking death in the face at that instant. *This is what the love of a percentage girl leads you to.*

Cursing disgustedly Budworth reinsawed his horses down, and spat aside into the boiling dust.

"Keep your hands away from your guns," warned Shick coolly, "and climb down off there."

"You must be crazy, Harry," grumbled Budworth; "you'll never get away with this, man."

Shick laughed. "Why not, Bud? There won't be anyone left to tell Finlaw what happened here!"

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"I want Christopher," grated Cardoner; "I'll give him an even break, and gut-shoot the hell outa him!"

"Finlaw will figure out what happened, Harry," said Budworth.

"Not the way we're going to handle it, Bud," said Shick, smiling palely. "Comanche torture, you know, and the scalps lifted. Pando's very clever with a knife."

Shick had a revolver in his hand. The others held rifles, except for Cardoner, who was empty handed in anticipation of dueling with Chris. "I'm goin' to get *him* my way!" Cardoner said. "To hell with your Indian tricks!"

"You're a fool to take the chance, Card," said Shick flatly.

Cardoner laughed, his queer amber eyes burning steadily at Ellner. "I ain't takin' any chance, Harry."

Shick gestured with his gunhand. "Get down, get down," he ordered.

ELLNER swung from the seat, and Budworth clambered laboriously down the wheel. Cardoner threw off and stalked toward Ellner, elbows out, hands clawed near his gun butts, prowling with that panther grace. Ellner stood straight and easy, arms hanging naturally, brown eyes slitted on his opponent.

"Of all the damn foolishness," muttered Shick.

"Shut up and stay outa this!" Cardoner told him. "Come on, Curly Locks, reach for it!"

Watching those yellowish eyes, Chris Ellner saw them dilate and started to move, his right hand flashing barely ahead of Cardoner's. The Colt swung up in a smooth arc and burst aflame, jumping in Ellner's hand a split-second before fire jetted from Cardoner's muzzle. Ellner felt the hot breath of lead, and saw dust spurt from the other man's shirt. Jolted backward, a look of shocked surprise was on Cardoner's bold dark face.

He threw down again, way too far, firing into the roadbed, and Ellner triggered once more as his barrel fell back into line. Cardoner jerked and spun, walked three wavering jack-kneed paces, and toppled full length in the weed-grown ditch. Everybody there knew that Cardoner was dead when he struck the ground.

Chris Ellner expected death in that instant. It would have come, if Shick's horse hadn't started pitching and bucking with the rest, just as Shick took his shot at Ellner... Budworth lifted his .44 and let go at Shick with awesome speed for one of his bulk; the snap shot went home. Harry Shick plunged headlong from the saddle, one boot catching in the stirrup as his mount bolted, dragging that once-sleek pomaded head along the rough stony trail.

Before anyone else could fire, horsemen loomed against rose-colored clouds along either rim of the cut, and Stonetsch's bull-throated voice blared: "Hold it, down there! Drop your guns! You're all covered!"

Tall Tackel tried to shoot and run then, but was shot out of the leather before his horse had taken two bounds. The squat Pando followed suit, going down rolling and riddled beneath the wagon, his mount threshing in the death throes between the high wheels. The other two men discarded their weapons and sat their saddles in complete submission. Budworth and Ellner watched them and waited, while the riders on top found breaks in the rimrock and slid down talus drifts to the bottom.

"We been on their track ever since they left Elkton," remarked the long lean Harrup, reining up at the wagon.

"Seems like all we do is get you two boys out of jams," laughed the devil-may-care Malkin. "Don't know what you'd do if it wasn't for us!"

"We'd get along fine," Budworth assured him. "We had two down before you chipped in, cousin. Both here and back at Dikeman's—remember, Mal?"

"Your partner's all right," conceded

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Malkin, winking at Ellner. "It takes a good man to cut down Spano and Cardoner. But you, Bud..." He shook his blond head in mock dismay.

"Yeah? Did you see that draw I made on Shick?" demanded Budworth.

"Slow, Fatso. Awful slow," Malkin chided.

Budworth blistered his ears with curses and epithets, and laughter echoed along the defile. Chris Ellner couldn't help feeling some kinship with these rough-and-ready riders, even though he knew that they were his real enemies, more so than the men who lay dead in this pass.

"Well, you're on your own now, boys," said the stern-faced Stonetsch. "We're headin' back with the prisoners. Maybe we'll meet you again at the last rendezvous. It all depends on the Shark."

"What about them corpses?" asked Budworth.

"We'll pack 'em in on the horses. You get along with that load, Bud," said Stonetsch.

●

THE SUN was gone, the afterglow lingering in delicate shades on the skyline, and twilight was cool and lavender on the wilderness, as they rumbled on out of that rock-walled corridor, in which four men had died. Ellner thought: *Nancy's scheme kind of backfired. She'll be a surprised wench one of these days, when I run her down.*

"This has been quite a trip so far, son," said Budworth.

"It sure has, Bud," agreed Ellner, thinking that the best—or worst—was yet to come.

"Reckon you've guessed where we're goin' by now, Chris?"

"Looks like the Comanche agency at Red Cloud."

"That's what it is, kid. Be in there tomorrow sometime—with luck."

"What happens when we get there, Bud?"

"Nothin' to it, Chris. We park the load, wagon and all. Change these nags for a couple of saddle horses. Pick up our purse and ride out."

"Sounds mighty simple," Ellner murmured.

"Couldn't be much simpler, son," said Budworth, squirting tobacco juice at a birch tree beside the trail.

Chris Ellner regarded his comrade with considerable affection. This fat man had saved his life at least twice. Ellner had no idea how he was going to handle Budworth, or what he was going to do with him, when the ultimate showdown came. He'd feel like a traitor, turning on old Bud. It wasn't a pleasant prospect at all.

"Camp up here," announced Budworth. "Spring water—for them that likes water. Real nice and cosy. The wolves and coyotes howl you to sleep, Chris, with maybe an owl or two chimin' in." Bud laughed. "It's almost enough to drive a man back to what they call civilization, son."

5

THE RED CLOUD Agency occupied a flat-bottomed bowl, nestled securely in the foothills below the Paladin Peaks. There was the long log trading post and residence of Zillah Bible, surrounded by smaller log cabins and pine-board sheds, horse corrals, stockpens for beef, and a scattering of Comanche lodges and wickiups. The Indians who made their homes here were mostly old men and women, widowed squaws and children, willing to endure Zillah's preaching in order to eat regularly, if not too well. It was about twenty-five miles north of Fort Shelley.

Chris Ellner and Budworth came in sight of it the afternoon following the fight with Harry Shick's party, and Ellner thought wryly: *If my re-*

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port had got through to Shelley, Rusty Cadill and Rip Rowan would be on their way, or here already, with a detail from L Troop, and this whole thing would be in the bag. But thanks to Nancy Dorr, I've got to play a lone hand, do it the hard way, and the odds are so long I don't even dare to estimate them.

Just before the winding road dipped into its last half-mile descent toward the hill-girded basin, Budworth pulled off across a level rock surface into a crooked steep-sided ravine, and reined up in a gloomy stand of pines that completely shrouded the big freight wagon. "Trail's end," he sighed, easing his bulk down over the wheel. Ellner jumped down and paced about to limber his long legs. It was cool, hushed and fragrant in the deep green shade of the pines.

After an interval of exercising and resting, they picked up their personal gear, unhitched the six horses, and started down the gully toward the agency, herding the animals before them. It seemed as if they had been living a long time in that hooded wagon.

The drowsing encampment looked deserted in the afternoon sunshine, but a limping Indian came out to take the horses, and pointed to a pair of saddled mounts at the shady hitch-rack before the trading post. Zillah Bible emerged from his office, tall and ramrod-straight with flowing white hair and beard, and intense black eyes burning in his emaciated face. Budworth waddled forward to shake hands and converse briefly with the agent, while Ellner leaned on a rail and fashioned a cigarette.

He was just lighting it, and thinking that everything was going smooth, when Amanda Ward appeared beside her uncle, staring directly at Chris Ellner, but without recognition or expression. After an agonizing moment, the girl turned away and walked back into the main store. Ellner had no way of knowing whether or not she had identified him, and what it would mean to her if she had. Certainly Amanda knew nothing about smuggling rifles to the Comanches, but Ellner was sure now that old Zillah Bible was involved, despite his religious zeal and saintly reputation.

LAUGHING voices sounded from the trading post, and Ellner glimpsed the faces of several men peering from the dirty webbed windows. He couldn't be positive, but he thought he saw Shark Finlaw and Hocknod and Veysey inside the murky glass. If they were there, it seemed odd that they wouldn't invite Bud and himself in for a drink or some such thing, but he supposed there were certain protocols they observed in this business. Ellner wondered how Amanda happened to be here, when Cadill had been dedicated to keeping her at the post. She looked as sweet, charming and gracious as ever, but he didn't like the idea of her laughing and flirting with men like Finlaw, Veysey and Hocknod. It was illogical that Amanda should find anything in common with them.

Budworth returned in a few minutes, saying: "That's it, kid. Let's mount up and ride."

"Thought I saw Finlaw and some of the boys inside," Ellner said.

"Probably did," Budworth said indifferently. "But our orders are to clear out, and that's what we're goin' to do."

"Sure," agreed Ellner. "Nothin' to hang around here for."

Budworth grunted. "Except that niece of Zillah's. And she ain't for us, boy."

"Pretty girl."

"A lot of woman," Bud said. "But highfalutin', notional, and sometimes I think she's touched in the head like her uncle."

"I wouldn't know about that."

Budworth chortled. "They say all the young officers at the fort are pant-

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in' and droolin' after her. But about all they get to do is kiss her hand!" Bud barked with derisive laughter.

Ellner could feel the hot color in his neck and cheeks, as they stepped into their saddles, but he was sun-tanned and dirty and unshaven enough so the flush didn't show through... They rode out of the bowl and climbed into the choppy wooded hills again. It was good to straddle leather, after so many jarring miles on that wagon seat.

They followed the wagon road out. Beyond that first rise, Budworth stopped to trample and obliterate all traces of their turning off onto the stone platform. The freight wagon was completely hidden in that pine-darkened ravine. "I sure feel better to get rid of that load," muttered Budworth, and Ellner nodded with understanding.

A couple of miles down the trail, Chris Ellner concluded it might as well be now as any time. Dropping behind a bit and strangely scalded with shame and guilt, Ellner eased his .44 Colt from its sheath and called, "Bud, hold up a minute."

Budworth turned and stared at the gun, looking astonished and then amused. "Well, kid, you beat me to it."

"What do you mean, Bud?"

"I was supposed to take care of you, Chris, maybe you could feel it comin', huh?"

"But why, Bud?" asked Ellner.

"The Shark wasn't quite sure of you, son, so I was to get your half of the bonus pay for burnin' you down." Budworth grimaced and spat. "Couldn't do it like that, of course. I figured on gettin' the drop on you and runnin' you off somewheres."

"That's what I've got to do with you, Bud."

"What's your game, boy?"

"Does it matter, Bud?" Ellner sighed wearily. "I've got to go back there. I want you to ride on—and out of this country, Bud. It's the only way you'll stay alive and out of jail."

"So, you *are* a government agent?" Budworth chuckled with ironic mirth. "Suspicioned Slaighter some, but not you—until Spano started blowin' off... Well, I ain't in any position to argue, Chris."

"Ride out, all the way out, Bud," said Ellner. "This business is goin' to bust wide open. The army's movin' into it now."

Budworth glanced at the gun. "You wouldn't shoot me, would you, son?"

"You know damn well I wouldn't, Bud!"

Budworth beamed with pleasure and satisfaction. "That's the way I felt about shootin' you, Chris. But I'll get out. Ol' Uncle Bud never had no hankerin' to live behind bars."

"Thanks, Bud."

"You tread careful back there, boy. The army ain't come up yet, and you're outnumbered pretty bad."

"I'll be careful, Bud. And you keep on ridin'. You can have my share of the bonus money—even if you didn't put me under." Ellner smiled at him. "I don't need it, Bud. Couldn't use it, if I did."

"Thanks, son," grinned Budworth. "I won't waste it on nothin' but whiskey, poker and women!" He held out his hand. "It's been purely a pleasure, Chris."

Ellner holstered his gun and shook that hand firmly. "Likewise with me, Bud. Thanks for everythin', and the best of luck."

THEY PARTED and rode off in opposite directions, Budworth east toward the Cordovan, Ellner back westward into the shadow of the Paladins. Bud could have wheeled and shot Ellner from the saddle with ease. Chris was so sure Bud wouldn't, that he never once turned to glance over his shoulder. Chris Ellner was fully concerned with the problems and dangers before him.

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Almost back to the hidden vehicle, Ellner heard the hoofbeats of several riders coming up from behind. Kneeing his mount off the trail, he took shelter behind a brush-screened clump of boulders, stepping down and holding his horse's nostrils and muzzle to prevent whickering. In a few minutes Stonetsch, Malkin, Ponsford, and three other men clopped past in the road and went on toward the agency.

If they had encountered Budworth, they would know that Ellner was still skulking around the vicinity. But Budworth was too smart to permit them to spot him, Ellner felt certain. Bud would have pulled out and watched them pass, just as Chris had... This placed the key figures of the entire outfit at Zillah Bible's. Ready to be taken like sitting ducks, if only the cavalry would come up from Shelley. But since Ellner's message had gone astray with Nancy Dorr, there was no reason for the troopers coming to Red Cloud on this particular afternoon.

The issue was strictly and wholly up to Lieutenant Christopher Ellner, masquerading in the torn and filthy range garb of a frontier teamster.

First, Ellner decided, he would inspect the load they had left in that narrow secluded ravine, to ascertain beyond any doubt that it consisted of repeating rifles and cartridges for the hostile Comanches in the mountains.

●

Chris Ellner, his horse hobbled well back and below in the woods, lay stretched on the mossy rimrock above the piney gulch, comfortable in the shade of stunted cedars and firs, his Henry rifle close at hand. He had pried into the wagon-load down there, enough to identify its contents. Exactly what he had expected: Henry repeaters and their .44-.40 shells. Enough for all the fighting bucks in the Comanche nation, who still lacked firearms. With these weapons, the savages could storm Shelley and overrun the whole Madrill country.

A rustling and stirring sound from the rear brought Ellner about with his carbine poised. Surprise shocked his lean dark-stubbled features, as he lowered the barrel. Amanda Ward was creeping toward him with a conspiratorial smile. She had changed from the blue dress to riding breeches and gray silk shirt. Her bright chestnut hair was obscured by an old felt hat. The blue eyes were wide and brilliant in the pure delicate loveliness of her face. The tight pants and shirt revealed flowing curves, that made Ellner's breath catch painfully in his throat.

"What are you doing here in that ridiculous disguise, Chris?" she asked, soft and drawling, as she seated herself close beside him.

"I thought you were supposed to stay at the post," he countered.

Amanda laughed. "Couldn't stand it after you left, darling. I was so lonely and bored there, I had to get away."

"Please, Amanda. Don't give me that."

"It's the truth, Chris," she said, with a delightful pout. "Aren't you even going to kiss me?"

"I'm dirty, Amanda. And I need a shave."

"I don't mind that, Chris. It makes you more—masculine."

He studied her in thoughtful silence. There was something sensual about her mouth, and strange erotic highlights dancing in her blue eyes. She seemed more eager, more ardent than ever before. The primitive background changed this girl. Ellner was half-afraid of her.

"I saw you down there with that fat man," Amanda said. "I knew you'd be coming back here, Chris. Did you kill him?"

"No, I didn't kill him," Ellner

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pointed over the edge at the hooded wagon below. "Do you know what's in that, Amanda?"

"Why no, should I?" She looked thoroughly innocent. "I don't really care, Chris... Put your arms around me, darling."

Ellner shook his dark tousled head. "There's too much else..."

She drew herself up in cold blazing wrath. "You're a fool, mister! All you officers are fools. You don't know how to treat a woman, you stupid Northern louts!"

"Thank you, Amanda." He regarded her with mild amazement. Budworth had something, when he said she was touched in the head.

"What's in that wagon, you big brave secret agent?" she ranted on.

"Guns and ammunition," Ellner stated calmly. "For the Comanches."

INSTEAD of being shocked and disbelieving, Amanda laughed at him. "Isn't that too bad?" she jeered. "They need guns to hunt with, don't they? You want all the Indians to starve to death?"

"They don't want them for hunting. They want them to kill whites with, Amanda."

"Well, that's a shame, isn't it?" she mocked. "You want to win all your wars. without any opposition?"

Ellner knew then that this girl was unbalanced. It showed in her eyes, and echoed in her tones. A Southern woman, still fighting the war, still hating the Union.

"Amanda, you don't realize what you're saying," he protested. "Did you ever see a white family after the Indians finished with them? The women and children along with the men?"

She was suddenly quiet, sober, staring intently at him. Ellner reached out for her, seeing her then as a small bewildered child in need of comfort and consolation. Abruptly she flung herself against him, her arms clutching furiously, her mouth fastened on his so hard that his teeth cut the inside of his lips. A wild impassioned thing, she writhed in his arms, and Ellner was awed and chilled by her unbridled fury... Then, as quickly as she had come to him, Amanda wrenched away and slapped him viciously across the cheek.

Stung to anger, Ellner grasped her arms, but Amanda burst free with a strength far beyond her own. He said, "What's the matter with you, Amanda? I don't understand..."

"You don't understand anything about women, you Northern clod!" she cried. "But you're going to get something for your sneaking and spying on us, Lieutenant!" She turned her head and called something in the Comanche tongue, then hurled herself upon Ellner once more.

Before he could throw her off, two half-naked Indians were on top of him, the greasy smoky stench of them wiping out the fragrance of Amanda, as she rolled clear and watched from a kneeling posture. Ellner fought desperately, but one muscular brave pinned him down and the other beat him over the head with his own pistol barrel. Just before his senses fled under the flashing strokes, Ellner dimly saw Amanda clawing in to restrain that swinging copper arm and pull the young bucks off him. Then the fiery explosions faded to empty blackness within his skull...

●

WHEN ELLNER recovered consciousness, he was being bundled roughly along between the two Comanches, one of whom wore his shell belt and gun, while Amanda Ward walked along beside them carrying his carbine. Ellner raised his head, and the splitting pain made him retch with sickness. Gradually his eyes came into focus, and his legs strengthened enough to bear his weight. They were climbing an easy slope in the forest, instead of descending toward the basin of Red Cloud. Ellner was wondering about this, as the girl spoke: "You

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mentioned what Indians did to whites. I have never seen them work on a prisoner. They're going to put on a demonstration for us this evening, Lieutenant Ellner, with you as the subject."

"You and your uncle are both insane," he panted.

Amanda smiled and shook her head. "Not insane, Chris. Just loyal to a long lost cause—the Confederacy."

"You hate us so, you'd turn us over to the savages—for torture?"

"That is correct," Amanda said. "Union soldiers wiped out my family, as well as Zillah's; we have never forgotten."

"You can't expect to get away with this," Ellner said. "Not for long."

Amanda laughed airily. "We have done very well so far, Chris. You military people are abominably stupid!"

"I suppose Finlaw and his men will be spectators, too."

"They wouldn't miss it," Amanda assured him. "After they get rid of the rifles you were kind enough to deliver. It will be a gala celebration, Yankee."

"I congratulate you on having a strong stomach, girl."

"I saw what your soldiers did to my family!" Amanda flared. "That gave me the stomach to stand anything that could possibly happen to a Northerner!"

They soon reached their destination in the waning afternoon, a warrior camp of twenty-five or thirty, Ellner judged, in the command of a young sub-chief called Fire Wolf. Amanda conferred with the chieftain, while Ellner was being bound to a charred upright stake in the center of the encampment. Chris could see the ghastly program unreel in his mind's eye—the worst possible end that could come to a man, all dignity and decency ripped and seared from it. Sickness spread in him until it blotted out everything else.

Amanda came and stood before him, hands on superb hips, the full rounded curves of her body thrust arrogantly at the helpless captive. "We may even call in some squaws," she said. "If not, perhaps I'll try my own dainty hand at it, Yankee!"

Chris Ellner said nothing. There was nothing to say to a female creature like this one. Silently he was praying for the cavalry to come up from Shelley, but he had little hope of the prayer being answered. Thanks to the betrayal by another feminine monster named Nancy Dorr.

All at once, as he slumped back on that blackened post in the midst of merciless enemies, the whole grotesque pattern struck Chris Ellner as being outrageously funny, and throwing his curly head back on the wood he laughed like a madman. Amanda observed him with a new and kindred interest, and the Comanches eyed him askance as they yipped and yowled back at his unseemly mirth.

I sure pick myself some real nice girls, thought Chris Ellner. *When it comes to choosing women, the best is none too good for this boy... May I kiss your hand, Amanda?*

6

DARKNESS had come, campfires were blazing bright and red; and Chris Ellner was still bound to the sacrificial pole in the warriors' camp, his blood stagnant and his limbs numb and his brain on the verge of cracking. This waiting was too much to endure. It broke a man before the ordeal began.

Amanda Ward had gone back to Red Cloud. At any time now she might be returning with crackpot Zillah Bible, with Shark Finlaw and his gunfighters. Then the sport would start. Sport for them and the Comanches. Braves had drifted in, and squaws

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were appearing among them. Ellner had heard a lot about the technique of the Indian women in such matters, and had witnessed several hideous examples of their fiendish handicraft. The helplessness of his situation and the knowledge of what was in store for him, set every nerve and sinew to screaming in silent protest.

Ellner had abandoned all hope, when the drum of hoofbeats reached the fireside. That would be the guest of honor from the agency. The Indians began to mill about the stake, and eye their victim with fresh interest and anticipation. Squaws reached out taloned hands to tear at his shirt and trousers, rake furrows in his skin. Lighted splinters from the fire were thrust into his flesh. Ellner locked his teeth against any sound, and prayed that it would not last too long... Fire Wolf strode in with overwhelming pomp and dignity banishing his people from the immediate area of the torture post.

But the horses were coming with a trampling crashing rush now, and there were too many of them for the party from Red Cloud. The Indians made belated lunges for their weapons, as the brass scream of a trumpet shrilled through the glade, and Ellner's heart seemed to soar and burst in his chest.

Then the cavalry was on top of them, the great geldings at a mad ruthless gallop; the troopers were revolving pistols aflame and sabers slashing. Rusty Cadill leading the charge, white teeth showing in his handsome bronzed face, and Rip Rowan swearing and spitting tobacco juice behind him. The brass blare of the bugle echoing on, and the troopers of L splitting their throats to equal the wild pitch of it. Never had the blue tunics and yellow-stripped trousers looked so good to Chris Ellner's anguished eyes.

The detail, only about a score of men, swept through the camp like a thundering avalanche, shooting, sabering, riding Comanches down, scattering the coppery bodies left and right, uprooting the lodges and stampeding the Indian ponies. There was Dalzell, driving his mount straight through and over a savage pack. Perrigo, his pistol blazing into a painted face on one side, his saber cleaving a shaven skull on the other. Ulmann, his horse down, fighting on foot with hand gun and steel blade. Schroeder aiming and firing his carbine with infinite care... There was Gillway going down with a lance clear through his body, and Krantz skidding backward over his horse's rump with half his face shot away.

For a space the clearing was almost empty and still, as the cavalry turned at the far end to charge back through it. Fire Wolf rose from a bloody tangle of bodies and staggered toward Chris Ellner, hatchet upraised for the death stroke... Ellner saw it start, and falter in midair, as a gun roared and the chief bent in the middle, pitched squirming and soon lifeless at Ellner's feet. And Budworth moved into the firelight, gun smoking in hand and a wide grin on his sweaty face. Quickly, deftly, the fat man cut Ellner loose from that stake, and blasted another Comanche who started for them.

"Hate to make a liar of myself, son," muttered Budworth. "But I had to come back. Worried about you, boy. Just couldn't ramble off and leave you in this nest of varmints."

Ellner smiled at him. "You don't have to make excuses, Bud. Isn't it enough that you've saved my damnfool life again?"

"Well, I reckon it's worth savin', Chris," said Budworth.

THE MEN of L Troop came back through camp at a slower pace, mopping up along the way, finishing off the wounded and making sure of the doubtfuls, feeling and showing no mercy in this engagement. It was all over in practically no time, the Comanches annihilated and two troopers

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dead, Krantz and Gillway, with others hit slightly.

Ellner was pulling his belt and gun off a dead brown torso, when Cadill and Rowan dismounted beside him. "We've got to get down to Red Cloud," Ellner told them, "before they get rid of the evidence."

Lenihan moved in, saluting and handing Ellner the saber and pistol he had taken from Gillway's body. "Sir, I think Gill would like you to have the use of these."

"And his horse, too," said Dalzell, holding out the reins.

"Thank you, Lenny. Thank you, Dal," said Ellner. "Let's be riding, Rusty."

Budworth elbowed him. "So you're one of 'em, an officer? Well, I'll be damned all to hell!"

Ellner nodded, laughing. "A hand-kissing lieutenant, Bud. Come on, you're riding beside me. I wouldn't last ten seconds in combat without my Uncle Bud!"

They mounted and struck downgrade toward the agency, the moonlight spilling bright silver through the trees, the creak and jingle of equipment pleasant again in Ellner's ears.

"What brought you up here tonight, Rusty?" inquired Ellner.

Cadill laughed. "Don't tell me you weren't glad to see us, Chris! We got your message—a little late."

"You did?" Ellner exclaimed with involuntary surprise.

"Why yes, didn't you expect it to get through?"

"Frankly, no."

"Well, it did, Chris. And I must commend your taste in couriers. A remarkably handsome and charming young lady."

"You mean Nancy Dorr's at Shelley?" asked Ellner.

"She is, of course," Cadill said. "The stage was held up, delaying her somewhat. She broke away from the bandits, and made the last lap on horseback—one of the outlaw's horses, in fact. Quite a girl, Nancy Dorr."

Ellner laughed brokenly, apologizing to Nancy in his mind. Then he said: "What happened to your romance with Amanda, Rusty?"

Cadill spat with contempt. "She came back to Red Cloud. For all I care, she can stay there the rest of her life."

"You don't know the half of it, boy," said Ellner, and went on to tell him about that afternoon...

●

A little later Sergeant Rowan slanted in next to Ellner, saying: "Been hearin' about a boy named Christopher, gettin' a reputation as a fist and gunfighter, Lieutenant. Wondered if I could take any credit on myself for it, you know."

Chris Ellner laughed and clapped Rowan on the shoulder. "Rip, the credit all goes to you. After the first brawl, I didn't do bad."

"Sometimes it helps to lose the first one," Rowan said soberly.

"Well, there were two of them that time, Rip."

Rowan nodded gravely. "Sure, that explains it, Lieutenant. I was wonderin' how you could lose to any one man."

"Afraid I lost a decision to a girl this afternoon, Rip," confessed Ellner.

Rowan waved it off with a thin smile. "Sure, and that happens to the greatest of champions. But it don't go in the record books."

The sergeant faded out on the flank, and Ellner fell to discussing tactics with Cadill. From what Amanda had said, it was likely that Zillah Bible and Shark Finlaw would be distributing rifles directly from the wagon in that wooded gulch. Strategy dictated the bottling up of both ends, and the placing of sharpshooters on either top rim. The cavalry would have all the advantage of surprise and position, but if the Comanches fought along with the contrabanders they would be vastly superior in numbers.

Ellner was relieved and gratified to find that Cadill had left a dozen more

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troopers back in reserve when he made his charge. With Ellner and Budworth replacing the two casualties, the army had thirty-six men to throw around the narrow canyon. They were going to need every one of them.

Ellner and Budworth with nine troopers took the lower entrance on the Red Cloud side, while Cadill with ten men held the upper end at the roadway. Sergeant Rowan and Corporal Schroeder, with seven men apiece, were to climb and cover both walls from the top. It had all the earmarks of a bad and bloody business in the moonlit night.

THE RAVINE was illuminated by the flickerflare of lanterns, under the pine trees about the canvas-covered wagon. The men there, having heard the gunfire from the higher foothills, were working with feverish haste to pass out arms and ammunition to the sixty-odd braves called in by Zillah Bible for this purpose. Shark Finlaw had his crew laboring hard to unload and uncrate the shipment, while Shark and Zillah checked the pieces as they were handed out. The white men had brought their horses, but the Indians were on foot, their ponies left in the corrals at the agency below. Amanda Ward was waiting in her uncle's trading post.

Rip Rowan's deep voice, ringing out from overhead, froze white and red men alike: "Hold everythin' down there! You are completely surrounded by the U.S. Cavalry! Drop your guns, put up your hands, and save yourselves from bein' slaughtered!"

Lanterns were dashed out, and men broke for cover, some of them firing up the walls as they scattered. Finlaw and his gunhands weren't surrendering, no matter how badly they were trapped. Rowan and Schroeder gave the order to open up, and crossfire from the upper rims lashed the pines and rocks. The Comanches, most of them still unarmed except for knives and tomahawks, panicked and fled wildly in either direction, screaming and tumbling under the hail of bullets. The ravine became a flaming blasting inferno, laced with muzzle-lights and choked with powdersmoke, the deafening roar of guns pierced by the cries of the wounded and dying.

Zillah Bible had crawled beneath the wagon and was praying frenziedly, his white beard buried in the ferns. Shark Finlaw and his men were racing for their horses, flinging into the saddle, and riding like mad for the lower end toward the basin of the agency, trampling dead and alive Indians as they fled. Ponsford, the dude, and two others never reached their mounts, cut down by fire from above. The giant Hocknod, lanky Harrup, and another were shot from their saddles in full flight, falling into a millrace of frantic Comanche bodies. But the other riders kept going, hanging low on their horses, caught now in a surging tide of running bucks.

Indians on foot were the first to reach the bottom of the passage, where Chris Ellner and his detachment were dismounted and waiting grimly. "Hold your fire, boys—they aren't fighting!" called Ellner. "Let 'em through and watch for the white men." The warriors, empty handed and without any stomach for night warfare, streamed past and on toward the valley of Red Cloud, a fear-crazed mob.

"Here they come, Chris! On horses!" shouted Budworth, and the army carbines and pistols began to crack as the first riders appeared in that human torrent.

THE BLOND Malkin and the coyote-faced Veysey went down right in front of Ellner, riddled and rolling with their thrashing mounts, the dust billowing high into the muzzle-flares. But some of the horsemen swept on through, miraculously untouched, Shark Finlaw and Stonetsch among them.

"Hold the rest of 'em, Comanches and all!" yelled Chris Ellner, dashing

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back to the nearest horse-holder, grabbing the first reins and swinging into the leather, booting the cavalry mount into a gallop. Hurtling on through ragged ranks of foot-weary Indians, Ellner drove after the riders who were breaking into the moon-bright bowl of the agency. Behind him the traffic had been shut off, as he ordered, and the shooting had ceased except for an occasional blast. Cadill was moving into the canyon from above, herding warriors before him, while Rowan and Schroeder brought their details down from the rimrock. It was all over in the ravine, with Zillah Bible being yanked out from beneath the freight dray, but the two men that Ellner wanted the most were on their way to escape and freedom. Shark Finlaw, the big boss, and Stonetsch, the murderer of Slaighter.

Another pair of horsemen diverged and was lost in the shadows, but Finlaw and Stonetsch were lining straight for the lights of the trading post. Summoning all the speed in his big rangy gelding, Ellner raced after them, gaining steadily, the Comanches all left behind now.

Stonetsch arrived first at the long log structure, throwing down immediately. Ellner was pulling up behind Finlaw as they neared the agency. Finlaw, assuming that he was an ally, didn't even glance back until Ellner's pistol barrel was slashing at his head. The shark mouth opened in a soundless snarl, the steel striking home with a vicious crunch, and Shark Finlaw pitched headfirst to earth.

Stonetsch whirled and drew, his gun blazing bright and loud, but Ellner was sliding off on the far side of his horse, and the lead buzzed overhead. Landing on the run, Chris Ellner leveled off and fired, orange flame spearing out and the Colt bucking against his wrist. The slug jarred Stonetsch's broad solid bulk backward on the logs, his gun torching once more, but on a down-slant that kicked gravel across Ellner's boots.

Chris Ellner lined and let go again, smashing Stonetsch against the wall. He tottered forward, stretched tall and stiff in agony, and toppled slowly onto his chest, arms flung wide and slack, rugged features rooting the dirt.

The door burst open and Amanda Ward emerged, staring in wide-eyed incredulous horror at Ellner's powder-grimmed face.

"Sorry to spoil your plans, Amanda," said Ellner easily. "But I'm afraid the Confederacy has lost another war."

AMANDA cried out weakly and fainted, falling at Ellner's feet. He looked down at her with indifference, making no move to touch or lift her. After a moment he went inside, found a whiskey bottle, and took a long swig from it. Carrying the bottle, Chris Ellner came back and sat wearily down on the doorstep to watch the unconscious Finlaw and Amanda and the dead Stonetsch. To nip at the whiskey and wait for Cadill to come in with the cavalry and their prisoners.

It's a good thing those Comanches weren't all armed and ready to fight, he reflected soberly. *It could have been very bad up there in the canyon... As it was, I doubt if we had a single casualty. Too bad that Krantz and Gillway had to die earlier, to free me from that torture stake. But I'm glad it wasn't worse. And I'm thankful that Nancy came through, and is on the level... This Amanda here, she's one for the book all right... I hope Dutch Slaighter, wherever he is, can see how this turned out. The Dutchman deserves that much out of it.*

The Shark will try to drag Budworth down with him, of course. I'll have to testify that Bud was working with me all the time. The least I can do for a man that saved my life three times... Be glad to get back into uniform. The army is nice and clean and peaceful, compared to civilian life in this country. In the freight business, at any rate.

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Chris Ellner observed the moon and the stars, and was suddenly and desperately lonely for Nancy Dorr.

When Ellner walked into his quarters in officers' row at Fort Shelley, Nancy Dorr was sitting there, her golden head burnished in a slant of afternoon sunshine, her face fine and clear, radiant with an inner light at seeing him. She rose quickly and Ellner took her at once into his arms, holding her with firm gentle strength and thanksgiving, kissing her with tender hunger. For a time they were wordless, too full of emotion for speech, needing only the reassurance of one another's arms and lips.

Then Ellner said: "I owe you an apology, Nancy. I've been thinking black thoughts about you—until Rusty Cadill told me you were here."

"But why, Chris?"

"That last night in Elkton, I saw Cardoner with you, Nancy. I thought you were selling me out. And I was sure of it, when Cardoner and Shick's crew ambushed us on the road."

"He suspected that you were going to run a load of rifles to Red Cloud," said Nancy. "He tried to have me confirm the suspicion. Naturally I insisted that I knew nothing about it... I'm glad I didn't know what you were thinking about me, Chris. I would have suffered more than I did."

"I'm sorry, Nancy," he murmured. "And fully ashamed of myself."

"You aren't to be blamed, Chris. After all, a man cannot expect too much of a girl from the *Silver Horseshoe* dance-hall."

"Don't say that, Nancy. That doesn't matter, in the least. I'm sorry I ever let it trouble me."

"Well, I should have told you before, Chris. I don't know why I didn't. A woman's whim, I guess."

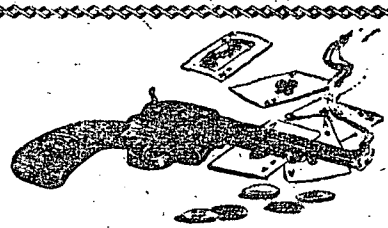
"You don't have to tell me anything, Nancy," he protested. "I know you, and that's enough."

"But I want you to know this, Chris," she said gravely. "My full name is Nancy Dorr Slaighter. I am Dutch's sister, and I went to Elkton to work with him."

Chris Ellner couldn't say anything, at the moment. He drew the girl close again, held her with gentle warmth, and Nancy's arms were clinging hard to him.

Finally he dared to trust his voice again: "Well, I guess Dutch would want it to be this way—with us, Nancy."

"Yes, Chris. I know he would," she said simply, and with complete assurance.



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Luke would sneak up and...

Jake Perkins figured that he didn't have many years more left to him, and he didn't want his niece to get his money. So what if he did rile up Luke James—then Jake realized, too late, that Luke would probably get the dinero.

READY FOR A COFFIN

By Gene Austin

THERE WAS a heavy silence in the saloon as the big man got to his feet, holding his teeth in his bloody mouth with one hand and beating the sawdust off the seat of his levis with the other.

"There ain't nobody can do that to Luke James and get away with it," he swore, glaring around him with frantic hate gleaming in his little eyes. "I'll be back—don't anyone forget it."

He turned and stumbled through the batwing doors into the darkness outside, and the men lined up at the bar shifted their eyes to the only seated man in the place.

Jake Perkins wouldn't have been sitting down if it had been possible for him to stand, but his legs had grown old while his mind stayed young, and they no longer responded to the orders he would liked to have given them. And he didn't like the air of silence and concern in the saloon.

"Lookee here," he growled, scowling ferociously. "I didn't trundle this here ball-bearin' wheel-chair of mine down here to be stared at like a two-headed maverick. Everybody order up drinks on me, and let's get back to the merrymakin'. If'n you want to stare, stare at this blasted freak of a bird I got here—*he* don't mind it!"

Jake addressed a few cuss words at a big, black glossy crow seated on the arm of his wheel chair, which had been looking with a watering beak at one of the bright silver buttons on Jake's breast. Prob-

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ably conscious of the attention called to it, the crow flapped its wings several times and returned to its contemplation of the button; Jake cussed it again and scowled back at the men.

"Well, what you waitin' on? James ain't comin' back tonight, at least!"

"You're mighty cool about it, Jake," somebody said. "If Luke James got it in for me like he did you tonight, I don't reckon I'd stay in this country two minutes."

"What if he did get it in for me!" Jake bawled. "Was I supposed to sit here like a cripple while he gun-whipped that new schoolteacher? Or was I supposed to take off this here belt of mine and whop him across the face with it and give the schoolteacher a chance to paste him one? Eh? I was supposed to whop him, naturally. Say, where is that schoolteacher? What happened to him?"

Everybody looked around for the schoolteacher, but he was no longer present. "Musta slipped out," somebody said.

"Well, no matter," Jake said. "Let's warm our windpipes with some o' that rotgut they sell here, and let the crow worry about Luke James. Satan," he growled, sneering at the crow again, in the way he had of showing his love for anything, "what does an ignorant, good-for-nothin' bird have to say about this?"

The crow, which had a vocabulary of four or five extremely profound sentences, looked around and observed, pertinently. *"If I go to heaven, I want to take my horse. Ha! Go to heaven and take my horse. Blast it! Ha, ha!"*

Jake took a sock at the bird, which flew to a safer point atop a nearby whiskey bottle, and the drinking in the saloon was resumed.

JAKE LEFT a few minutes afterward, after coaxing Satan back and placing him in his special cage under the chair seat, and then wheeling himself through the doors and into the cool night air.

"Ready to go home?" A voice said, and a man who had been leaning against the saloon hitch-rack stepped over to him. It was the new schoolteacher, Bob Partridge.

"What you hangin' around out here for?" Jake demanded, halting the progress of his wheel-chair.

"I just wanted to make sure that Luke James didn't hang around," the schoolteacher said. He was a tall, good-looking young man, and obviously new to Western ways. He wore his sixgun belted tight around his waist, and after informing him that it would be much easier to reach if allowed to hang slack on his hip, Jake added suspiciously: "What you askin' me if I'm ready to go home for? You ain't got any ideas that I pay any attention to my niece sayin' I got to be in by ten, do you?"

"Oh, of course not," Partridge said blandly. "I just wondered if you'd mind my walking along with you—I understand your house isn't far down the road. And I want to thank you for what you did in there, although I wish I could have handled him myself. Uh—your niece—that's Miss Mary Platt, isn't it—the girl who teaches the younger children at the school?"

"That's her all right," Jake snorted. "And of all the no-good females that ever lived, she's the worst. As for thankin' me for what I did, it warn't nothin' a'tall. Luke James didn't have no call to start on you jus' because you said he ought to learn to read. Everybody ought to learn to read."

"You read, of course," Partridge said.

Jake coughed. "Well—it's been a long time; I mean, I don't exactly read, but I sure like to look at pictures. I—"

Partridge quickly changed the subject, all the more because Jake's curfew time was fast approaching, and he well knew the old man wanted to get home on time.

"That's fine, Mr. Perkins—but it

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don't get rid of Luke James. I've only been here two days, but I've seen enough to know he's as dangerous as a snake. He's got a lot of pride—he's off somewhere now licking it, and he isn't going to stand for the humiliation he took in that saloon. He's going to be after both of us—you for hitting him in the face with your belt-buckle; me for knocking him down and disarming him."

"I ain't ascared of him," Jake butted in, his face very grim now. "But you're right; if you're as smart as schoolteachers are supposed to be, you'll get out of town quick. You got guts and a good left, but no gun-savvy. If you don't leave you'll be teachin' the stiffs up in Boothill the correct way to lay in a coffin."

Partridge tried the gun on his hip, drawing it clumsily and causing Jake to fear that he would accidently blow them both to Boothill. "And what about you?" Partridge asked.

"What about me?" Jake roared, maneuvering his wheel-chair out of the way till the schoolteacher holstered the .45. "I'm sixty-five years old—older'n any man should live to be in these Yewnited States. It's high time I died and made room for some young feller. There ain't nobody cares nothin' for me—I ain't worth a stale sourdough-cracker even to myself. And so I'd be glad to let James have the privilege of puttin' me out of my misery—except for one thing—"

"What's that?" Partridge asked, grabbing the handle of Jake's wheel chair and pushing him down the street, much to the old man's distress and over vigorous protests.

"I'll tell you what it is," Jake snapped, surrendering to be pushed. "It's just that I got thirty-thousand dollars I got to get rid of 'fore I die. That blasted niece of mine is just waitin' for me to fall in my grave so's she can get her hands on it, but I'll fool her. I'll get rid of it somehow, and then James can come ahead—"

"I'm not very well acquainted with your niece, but she seemed to be a very sincere and honest young lady," Partridge insisted.

"Baloney! I had a brother once that had money too, an' when he died you should have seen the way those relatives fought over it—it was like throwin' an apple to a bunch of hogs. They're all dead now but me and my niece, but when I keel over it'll be the same with her, much as she pretends she likes me. An' if she thinks she'll get it she's crazier'n a cow in a loco-weed patch. No, sir!"

THEY HAD arrived in front of Jake's house—the last house in town. It set back off the street about a hundred feet, and was surrounded by the biggest elm trees in town. Very pretty—but also very dark, and Jake cast a furtive eye at the dense shadows more than once as he was wheeled up the path to his porch. He didn't want to die before he found a way to get rid of that money, and Luke James might very well be lurking in ambush.

But they reached the porch safely, and although Partridge showed a distinct desire to renew his acquaintance with the lady of the house, Jake ordered him to be on his way, with parting advice that if he was smart he wouldn't stop till he was clear out of the state.

Then Jake pushed open the door and wheeled himself in, and found that his niece had been watching for his arrival through the front window.

Mary Platt was just twenty years old, and she had something bewitching about her for every one of the years; so many things in fact, that it was one of Jake's biggest fears that she might actually bewitch him into liking her. And now she was blushing, possibly from seeing the kind of company Jake'd had on his way home, and also angry, for the odor of very bad whisky was quickly filling the room. It was a very bewitching combination.

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"Jake Perkins, you've been drinking again! And you know very well it's bad for your blood-pressure!"

"Fat lot you care about my blood-pressure!" Jake snapped, looking everywhere but at her to escape being bewitched, and very glad he had sent Partridge away. He wouldn't want any man to see him getting a bawling-out from a danged upstart girl. "You're jus' hopin' they carry me home one o' these nights. That's why you're always mad when I show up alive."

A sorcerous tear appeared in Mary's eye, but she wiped it away quickly, stooped to kiss him on the forehead—causing him much anguish, and wheeled him into the living room.

"I'm sorry, Uncle," she said softly. "Are you sleepy?"

"No," he barked.

"Would you like me to read to you? We've never finished *Pilgrim's Progress.*"

"The hell with that pilgrim—he ain't progressin' fast enough for me. I don't want to hear no books. I want to sit here and think, an' when I get sleepy I'll go to sleep by the fire." He bent to release the catch on the door of the crow's cage, whereupon the bird emerged, hopped several times around the room and returned to the foot of his chair, where it stood and spoke these famous words: *I'll blow you to hell, you sidewinder! Ha, ha ha! Sidewinder, sidewinder. Ha, ha!*

Mary plugged her ears and ran upstairs before Satan could give further details.

JAKE WISHED his legs had been good, so that he could give Satan a kick in the direction he proposed to blow the sidewinder, but he settled on throwing a stick of firewood at him, making a clean miss, so that Satan was able to retire to a corner and amuse himself by picking at the bright buttons on a pair of Jake's shoes.

Jake could have sworn, then, that he heard a gentle sobbing sound coming from the region of Mary's bedroom, but he put this down as a product of his imagination, which was working hard at the moment.

For instance, suppose—he of course had no hope that any such thing could possibly be true—but suppose that Mary did love him, the way she pretended to, instead of just wanting his money. Suppose she didn't care a hoot about that thirty-thousand dollars he had in the bank—

Ah, but that was impossible. What was lovable about him—he was a crippled, cranky old man. Why, even the crow Satan hated him. And he thought about the world of Might Be, and thought how wonderful it would be, and how he would have loved his life in it. He shook his head mournfully and dozed away, and all the belligerence, the sharp voice, and the I-don't-give-a-damn part of him slept. Only Satan remained to think, with his little eyes glittering brighter as the fire died, and finally he went to sleep too.

Jake had a little garden behind his house. Nothing had ever grown in it but weeds and wire-grass, but he considered his day wasted if part of it wasn't spent in pushing his wheel chair around over that patch of earth and pecking at it with a hoe or rake. He was engaged in this industrious occupation, and computing his next year's crop—which he very well knew would be nothing, when Mary, who should have been at the school-house teaching the youngsters their Three R's, came rushing into the garden out of breath and with her pretty hair all out of place—which might have made it even prettier.

"Uncle Jake! Oh, Uncle!"

"Well, what ails you?" Jake demanded, making a pass with the rake at Satan, who was uncovering and eating his seeds.

"It's all over town—that fight last night! Oh, why didn't you tell me? Luke James is going around saying

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that he's going to kill you—and Bob Partridge too."

"Well, ain't that what you want? This is your lucky day. As for Partridge, I tol' him to get out of town, and if he's dumb enough to stay I guess he'll have to carry his own coffin."

MARY APPEARED about to dissolve into helpless tears, but maybe she remembered that this would only make her uncle worse than ever, for then he would try extra-hard to show that he didn't care a fig. She instead became very firm, and shook her finger threateningly under his nose. "He can help himself, but you can't. You've got to let me take you to the school-house where you'll be safe with us."

"I ain't been in a school-house for sixty-five years and got along all right," Jake retorted. He threw down his rake and glowered all around the garden, mad at the idea of anyone thinking he couldn't take care of himself. He guessed he'd done all right in the saloon last night when he'd save Partridge from the licking of his life. And he guessed he could do all right now.

"Okay," he said, glaring back at her. "I guess I might's well disappint you and tell the truth. James ain't goin' to kill nobody; he's the biggest liar in the country. There's a streak down his back as yellow as his teeth. He'll go braggin' around town for a couple days and then he'll sneak out when nobody's lookin' and be forgotten about. Besides, I tol' the sheriff to hang around this end of town tonight, an' if he sees James comin' this way he'll make short work of him.

"So there. You go back to school and torture them poor kids. There's some kind of parents' meetin' there tonight, ain't there?"

"Yes," she said dimly.

"Well, you stay for it. You might's well not come home 'cause I ain't goin' to get killed and you'll just be disappinted again. Understand?"

"Yes," she repeated, and suddenly seized him and kissed him right square on the mouth. He finally had to push her away, and it's a fact that he didn't push too hard.

Anyway, he didn't have a thing to say about it, and even if he'd had he wouldn't have got the chance. She turned and rushed back the way she had come and he was left alone—unless Satan could be considered company.

He cussed the crow until it came over and crawled into its cage; then he wheeled himself into the house. From the front room he could see the road that Luke James would have to come down if he intended to kill him. He wondered if Mary had believed the lies he had told her about James; but it was no matter, she was gone and that was all that she cared about.

Confound it—why did she have to kiss him like that? Why, a less shrewd man, or one who didn't know as much about life as he did, might have been fooled into thinking she'd meant that kiss. And if he'd have been that kind of dumb cluck, he might have been sitting there right now making out a will that would have left her all his money.

But, fortunately, she hadn't fooled him, and so he sat there without even the consolation of knowing someone loved him. And he even began to be impatient that the man who wanted to kill him was taking so long to come.

●

At nine o'clock it was almost completely dark outside, and he lit a lamp, keeping it low so that he could still see the road. Satan, most of whose sayings consisted of sentences repeatedly hurled at him by Jake, noticed the change and observed, *One of these days I'll wring your neck, you scrawny devil! Ha, ha, ha!*

"Another crack out of you and I'll do it tonight," Jake growled, and might have done just that if he hadn't heard a soft step on the porch. He

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jerked his head up and saw the shadowy form of a big man peering at him through the window of the door, and in another second James was in the room.

JAKE HAD never noticed before that James was as ugly as he looked tonight, particularly in the poor light. The shadows accentuated his busted, humped nose and his mean little eyes. Across his mouth was a wide red welt, where Jake's heavy belt buckle had hit him the night before. He had a .44 in his right hand, and a bagfull of something in his left.

"So you was fool enough to stay here alone tonight," he rasped, closing the door behind him.

"Sometimes I think I'm a pretty big fool," Jake answered.

"You proved it tonight," James said. "And I'm goin' to teach you it ain't nice to butt into my fights. I've wanted to blast that nosey head of yours open for a long time."

"You takin' your lunch along so you won't have to owlhoot with an empty stomach?" Jake said, indicating the sack.

"That ain't no lunch," James grinned. "I took the trouble to jimmy my way into the bank and shoot that tin box open they got in there. There ain't no one follerin', so it mustn't a been heard. That's the money in that sack. Most of it's your money."

"You're welcome to it," Jake said, but a lump clogged up his throat. When it got to brass tacks, he guessed he'd rather Mary got his money than Luke James. And as he stared at the little round hole in the end of the .44, he realized with a pang that he did not want to die just yet. He wanted to live a little longer, to make sure about that kiss. Just a little longer.

He knew he'd have been dead in another second if it hadn't been for Satan, who chose that moment to lament that he wanted to take his horse along to heaven.

James' trigger finger relaxed a trifle. "Let that crow out. He's another nosey one, just like you. And I want to blow his head off too."

Jake's eyes fired. "If anyone blows that crow's head off I'll do it," he snarled.

James didn't argue. He kicked the front off the reed cage, scaring Satan half to death, but the crow shortly recovered and strutted out onto the floor, smoothing his ruffled feathers with his beak.

Jake's heart sank as James raised his gun to shoot the bird, but as he watched Satan, it began to rise again and beat very fast. Satan calmly ignored the gun, but peered attentively at James' face, cocking his head on one side in a meditative manner. Then he suddenly rose off his feet, beating his wings like a windmill, and dove straight for one of James' gleaming eyes.

The gunman tried to leap out of the way of the sharp beak, and lost a piece of his nose to Satan as he shot wildly in the air. The crow was on him again instantly, and James, cursing, beat madly at it with his hands; he dropped his gun and fell against the wall as a sizable piece of his lip disappeared.

Jake grabbed the wheels of his chair and put all his strength into it as he ran his footrest into James' shins—and the double onslaught was too much for the gunman. He collapsed howling to the floor, with Satan still intent on his eye and Jake reaching for the Colt on the floor.

His hand closed around the butt just as James regained his feet and jumped at him; he jerked it up and fired, and the gunman fell again, this time to remain, at the foot of his chair.

JAKE HARDLY had time to recover from the excitement before he heard more footsteps running toward the house. Quickly he grabbed the sack of money James had dropped and shoved it under the blanket that

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covered his legs; then he leaned back and closed his eyes.

Mary and Bob Partridge burst into the house a moment later—Mary instantly fell on Jake, threw her arms around his neck, and began to sob hysterically. "He's dead; he's dead!"

Jake was getting drenched with tears. He partly opened one eye. "Oooooh—where am I?" he groaned. "W—what happened?"

Instead of the tears stopping, they increased. "Oh, Uncle! You're alive! Oh, thank Heaven!"

"No, thank the devil," Jake muttered.

In a minute everyone was calm but Bob Partridge, who looked very worried. "I don't know whether I ought to mention it or not, after this first shock," he said. "But they've discovered that the bank was robbed sometime this evening. The sheriff thought that either James or a couple strangers who were in town this afternoon might have done it—but there isn't any money on James. The others might be a long ways from here by now. You may never see your money again."

"This is too much," Jake said, closing both eyes and appearing to pass away, but opening them immediately thereafter. "This leaves me without a cent. I'll starve to death."

Bob Partridge fidgeted around in discomfort. "Oh, no you won't," he burst out suddenly. "I'm here to say that if Miss Mary Platt will have me, I'll marry her and support you both!"

Mary smiled through her tears. "Even if I didn't love you," she said, "I think I'd marry you anyway."

Jake was positively dumbfounded. He wanted to cuss good and loud, but held it back on account of the lady present. He looked at Satan, disconsolate and alone in a corner, staring at Luke James' closed eyes.

"Hand that infernal crow here," he growled.

"Please don't hurt him, Uncle," Mary said. "He uses bad language sometimes, but he's really a very nice bird."

"I ain't a-goin' to hurt him," Jake snapped. "I just want to tell him that if he still wants an eye, he can have one of mine!"

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WAGON WHEELS

By J. J. Mathews

THE GREAT wagons that carried people and goods to the West could take so much strain and no more. When they started to break and go to pieces, ingenuity often came to the rescue. Captain Bonneville describes a situation he and his party had to face. As they reached a high altitude, the rarity of the atmosphere began to affect the woodwork of his wagons; the wheels began to fall to pieces. A wagon without wheels was useless but how could you fix such a wheel?

A remedy was at length devised which was very clever. The tire of each wheel was taken off, and a band of wood was then nailed round the exterior of the felloes. The tire was made red-hot, replaced round the wheel, and suddenly cooled with water. Then the wheels were replaced, and onward went those great wagons that did so much to open the West.

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Walt Ferguson had a killer to track, and the trail led to something more sinister than an escaped convict.

THE DEVIL'S PAYOFF

By James Edward Hungerford

BITTER, troubled thoughts nagged at Sheriff Walt Ferguson's brain as he rode down Caliente Trail that afternoon on his way to the Jeff Blaney ranch. A vicious outlaw killer, "Buck" Kellerman, was again on the loose in Blackthorn County. The escaped convict from Nevada State Prison had already robbed a bank, held up an express stagecoach, and murdered a cattleman enroute home from town with his ranch pay-roll cash.

Walt was on his way to warn his friend, "Uncle Jeff" Blaney, to be on the lookout for Killer Buck. The old

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ranchman often kept a considerable sum of money in his house, in an old metal cash-box.

Walt had another purpose in visiting the Blaneys. He wanted to have a serious, heart-to-heart talk with Uncle Jeff's niece, Stella. For the third time he was going to ask Stella Blaney to be his wife. Twice before, she had put him off with evasive answers, unable to definitely decide as to her future. This time, Walt had resolved, it would be a showdown between him and Stella. Her answer must be a final "yes" or "no."

Jogging along Caliente Trail, the young lawman had reached a clump of juniper trees marking the western boundary of the Blaney spread, when the blast of a .45, followed by a woman's shrill scream, split the afternoon silence. A minute later, Walt saw a man plunge out of the Blaney ranch-house, sprint down the path to the road, fork a horse, and race eastward along Caliente Trail.

Spurring his animal to a gallop, Walt had not gone far when a girl came running toward him, waving her arms and crying out in anguish.

"Stella! For Gawd's sake, what's wrong? What's happened?" he shouted. "Who was the rannie I saw leavin' your house on the jump, a minute ago?"

The girl seemed terribly shaken; on the verge of collapse. "Oh, Walt, it's—it's terrible!" she burst out. "A murderous beast just killed Uncle Jeff! Shot him down in cold blood, and stole his money-box! With his last breath, Uncle Jeff gasped out the killer's name—Buck Kellerman! Oh Walt, don't let that murderer—"

"Don't worry, I'll get him!" assured Walt. "I'll run the sidewinder down, if I have to chase him to hell an' back! He won't get away with it this time! I promise you that, Stella!"

As Walt headed his horse eastward at a gallop, down Caliente Trail, Stella Blaney called out to him in sudden fear. "Be careful, Walt! Don't take chances with that beast! Being a newly elected sheriff, he'd rather shoot you down than any man in Blackthorn County!"

"Don't worry about me, honey!" flung back Walt. "What I'm concerned with is showin' the voters I'm a *good* newly-elected sheriff!"

Stella watched with troubled eyes as the young lawman raced in pursuit of her uncle's murderer. When a bend in the trail obscured him from view, she turned and made her way stumblingly back to the ranch-house.

PURSUING the fleeing killer, Walt sighed heavily. The devil himself seemed to be trying to checkmate his and Stella Blaney's happiness. For one thing, a philandering loafer, named Pete Briggs, was forcing attentions on the girl, boasting of money he expected to inherit from a relative. Stella liked Briggs, though her uncle had been bitterly opposed to the fellow's visits to the ranch. Walt felt certain Briggs' chief interest in the girl was her uncle's property and cash.

And now, to complicate matters, Killer Buck Kellerman had thrust himself violently into the situation. This was the sort of opportunity Pete Briggs would take the utmost advantage of. Now that her uncle was dead, Stella would inherit the ranch, and the scheming Briggs would leave no stone unturned to marry her.

For quarter of an hour, Walt made little progress in his race to overtake the fleeing murderer. But as miles dropped behind, he slowly closed in on the quarry. Presently, within firing range, he got his Colt into action.

Killer Buck would have answered back with some lead slugs of his own, if he'd had a chance. Clutching his murdered victim's money-box under one arm; steering his racing horse with the other, gave him plenty to do in making a getaway.

Steadily gaining on the killer, Walt saw him plunge his animal across a shallow creek, and head down a trail that led to a dense clump of juniper woods to the south. Reaching the

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creek, Walt plunged his own animal into the water with a splash that drenched him.

As Buck reached a bend in the offshore trail, Walt fired the last slug from his .45—was rewarded with a bellow of pain. Half blinded by spraying water as his horse plunged across the stream, Walt thought he saw Buck drop something. The next second, the outlaw rounded the trail-curve, disappearing from view.

Walt wondered if he had shot Uncle Jeff's money-box out of the killer's grasp. Reaching the trail-bend on the far side of the creek, he decided he had been mistaken. There was no money-box in sight. He caught a glimpse of Killer Buck as the fugitive vanished into the dense clump of juniper trees to the south.

Racing his horse past an old log cabin, not far from the woods, Walt glimpsed a man's face peering at him from a front window. The owner of the cabin was Walt's rival for Stella Blaney's hand, Pete Briggs.

"The damn skunk would like to see me get blasted out of my saddle!" gritted Walt. "He wouldn't waste any tears over my funeral, either!"

REACHING the juniper woods, south of Briggs' cabin, Walt slowed his horse to a walk. Following the outlaw into the woods, he knew he was heading into a death-trap. It would be easy for Killer Buck to ambush and shoot him down in that dense maze of juniper trees and underbrush.

"Looks like the sidewinder had given me the slip!" he gritted. "The devil himself couldn't have provided his favorite son with a better hidin' place than these damn woods!"

Unforking his horse, Walt was moving catlike along a path through the underbrush, when a gunblast split the woodland silence. A lead slug tore Walt's hat off his head, grazing his scalp. A second slug came so close, he could feel the fan of it.

Walt dropped down flat on his stomach, cursing. There were no more shots. A deathly silence had enveloped the woodland fastness. A few minutes later, Walt thought he heard a distant sound, like a horse plunging through underbrush. Then silence again. He sent a lead slug zinging through the trees. Then a second one. There was no answering shot. Was Killer Buck circling around, and closing in on him?

Presently Walt got cautiously to his feet. He now fully realized that Buck Kellerman held the winning hand in this game of hide-and-seek. He knew it would be nothing short of suicide to penetrate deeper into the timber. The outlaw murderer was probably waiting for just such a move. Then he would add another victim to his bloody record of killings.

It was a thoroughly disgusted young lawman who led his horse out of the woods, forked the animal, and backtrailed it to Pete Briggs' log cabin.

"Briggs has got no more love for me than I have for him," Walt told himself bitterly. "But the varmint knows every foot of that timber, an' he's goin' to help me uncover Buck Kellerman! Briggs won't do it as a favor to me, but I figger he'll play along with the Law for a slice of the reward cash offered for Buck's capture."

Reaching the cabin clearing, Walt unforked his horse and approached the front door of the log house.

A Powerful Feature Novel of the Old West

OUTLAWED LOVE

by Francis Flick

leads off the big December issue of

REAL WESTERN ROMANCES

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"Hey, you Briggs! You've got a visitor!" he shouted. "The Law is payin' you a call—but I ain't after you *this time!*"

There was no answer. Walt noticed that the blinds on the two front windows had been drawn since he had passed that way in pursuit of Killer Buck.

"No use bein' unsociable an' hidin' yourself, Briggs!" he bellowed. "I saw you lookin' out a winder of your cabin, when I rode past a while ago! I've got a cash business proposition to offer you!"

Walt's voice echoed back hollowly from the nearby wooded hills. The cabin seemed deserted. But Walt had a hunch that Briggs was in there; was playing 'possum.

Reaching the front door, he twisted the knob and found the door unlocked. Thrusting it open, he poked his head into the darkened front-room—and got a bang on the skull that staggered him.

Swaying on his feet, half conscious, he caught a momentary glimpse of his assailant. Cursing, he unholstered his hog-leg, fired blindly into the room. A bellow of pain, the crash of a falling body, rewarded him.

STEADYING himself, Walt stepped into the cabin. The light in the front room was so dim he could hardly distinguish objects. But he could see well enough to make out the body of a man sprawled on the floor.

"You saw me headin' for your cabin and was layin' for me, eh Briggs?" he rasped. "I know you hate me like hell, but I didn't figger you'd resort to cold-blooded assault, you sneakin' skunk!"

The man on the floor, sprawled face-down on his belly, didn't answer. He was out cold, with a lead slug in his left shoulder.

"Wake up, Briggs, an' explain why you tried to murder me!" shouted Walt. He seized hold of the man and shook him vigorously. Then he noticed that blood was trickling from a nasty scalp-wound on the rannie's head. But it wasn't a bullet wound.

"The damn bushwhacker must have busted his skull when he hit the floor, after I shot him," muttered Walt. "It serves him right for bustin' *me* on the head!"

Seizing the sprawled body, he jerked it over, face upward...and stared down at the gunshot victim popeyed.

The wounded rannie wasn't his enemy, Pete Briggs, as he had supposed. The man on the floor was the outlaw murderer he had chased into the juniper woods, half an hour ago—Buck Kellerman.

Recovering somewhat from the surprise-shock, Walt handcuffed the killer. To add to his bewilderment, he found no weapons on the outlaw. Killer Buck's gun-holsters were empty.

"Wake up!" shouted Walt, shaking him roughly. "Snap out of it, you snoozin' damn sidewinder!"

The murderer-thief showed signs of coming alive. He moaned, gasped for wind, blinked his close-set, puffy-lidded eyes. Walt slapped him in the face, to jolt him awake.

Suddenly, with a wheezy moan, Buck jerked his bulky torso to a sitting posture, cursing and pawing the air.

"Take it easy," growled Walt, "And do some explainin'! How come you to be here in Pete Briggs' cabin? And what happened to Pete Briggs?"

Killer Buck shook his head dazedly. "I—I don't know where the murderin' skunk is," he mumbled. "He—he damned near busted my brains out!"

Lifting manacled hands to his head, Buck fingered his skull-wound wincingly.

"What happened?" urged Walt. "What did Pete Briggs do to you?"

"Plenty!" snarled Buck. "When you was chasin' me acrost the creek, you shot old man Blaney's money-box outa my hold, and the sneakin' rattler that nests in this shack seen me drop it. Hoppin' out from behind some bushes, he grabbed the box and ducked into his cabin. After you chased me

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into them juniper woods, I give you the slip and backtrailed it here to get the box from that sneakin' polecat. When I stuck my head into the cabin, he busted me on the skull with a chair or somethin'. When I woke up, him and the cash-box was gone—also my guns. I was gettin' ready to *vamose* outa here, when you poked your head through the doorway—"

"And got a helluva bust on the skull!" snapped Walt. "I thought you were Pete Briggs."

Stepping to the cabin door, Walt shouted the owner's name several times, but there was no answer.

"Maybe Briggs rode into town and turned the money-box over to the U.S. Marshal, not wantin' to do me the favor of handin' it to me," mumbled Walt. "Funny, though, why he didn't take *you* along with him, Buck, and collect the reward. Maybe Briggs didn't know who you were or that a reward was offered."

A few minutes later, Walt and his prisoner were heading westward down Caliente Trail.

IT HAD BEEN a hard afternoon for the newly-elected young lawman, but he felt well compensated. In addition to the reward he would collect, it was a feather in any sheriff's cap to bag an outlaw like Killer Buck Kellerman.

Reaching the Blaney ranch, Walt headed his handcuffed prisoner up the house path, and onto the front porch. He was about to knock on the front door, when a voice reached his ears through an open living-room window.

"I sure am sorry this terrible thing happened to you, Stella," said the voice. "Under the circumstances—your Uncle Jeff being dead and you alone in the world, you wouldn't want to keep on livin' in this gloomy old house. My advice is, sell the ranch as quick as possible. As for me, I'm leavin' this part of the country on tonight's stagecoach, headin' for San Francisco. Later, you could meet me there and—"

"You—you're *leaving* for San Francisco tonight?" exclaimed Stella in a shocked voice.

"Sure thing, I'm leavin'," said the

No one foresaw what would come of the social experiment Jonathan Robertson started early in the 18th Century, on this little island. And Jonathan the 7th found the terrible fruit of what had been sown...

Here is a story you will not just read and forget

The Belt

By Wallace West

in the big November issue of

SCIENCE FICTION QUARTERLY

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visitor. "And I'm leavin' for good. I'm sick of this part of the country! I thought when you heard about my *good luck*, you—you might be willin' to marry me. My Uncle Jonathan Hicks died in Montana, suddenlike, and left me a few thousand dollars. If you'd sell your ranch and meet me in 'Frisco, we would get married and—"

"I'll *answer* that proposal for Miss Blaney!" interrupted a gruff voice from the doorway.

Into the living-room stepped Sheriff Walt Ferguson with his handcuffed prisoner.

Stella Blaney jumped up from her chair, staring. "Oh, Walt, you—you *caught* him!" she cried out. "Thank God, you caught the murderous beast!"

"Yep. I got him," said Walt. "I stopped by on my way to town to let you know, Stella. I was about to knock on your front door, when I heard your visitor offerin' some advice concernin' the sale of your Uncle Jeff's ranch. Then I heard him sayin' he inherited some money from an uncle in Montana, which he received today. Fact is, your visitor, Mr. Pete Briggs, is a damn thievin' liar! As I was chasin' Buck Kellerman, I shot your Uncle Jeff's money-box out of his grasp. Unseen by me, Pete Briggs grabbed the box an' ducked into his cabin. Later, when Buck gave me the slip in some woods, and backtrailed it to Briggs' cabin to get the box, Briggs knocked him out and vamosed with the cash—the *same* cash he claims to have inherited from his Montana uncle!"

Pete Briggs leaped up from his chair, pasty-faced. "Don't believe him, Stella!" he shouted. "He's lying! He's trying to fool you into believing—"

"Walt *isn't* lying!" broke in Stella. She was facing Briggs with blazing contempt. "I know by your actions and looks he is telling the truth! Hand over Uncle Jeff's money, and get out of this house or I'll horsewhip you out, you contemptible—"

"You're lettin' him off too easy, Stella," growled Walt. "I'm jailin' Briggs as an accomplice in the robbery. He's as guilty of thievery as Buck Kellerman is. Buck is what he is—an out-and-out murderin' thief. But this hypocrite, Briggs, is—"

"YOU WON'T jail me!" shouted Briggs, and made a stab for his gun. Before he could get it into action, Killer Buck Kellerman lunged forward, crashing his handcuffed wrists down on Briggs' head, dropping him like a felled ox.

"Good work, Buck!" commended Walt. "That evens your score with Briggs for bustin' you on the head in his cabin."

"I'd murder the sneakin' skunk, if you'd gimme a chance!" snarled Buck.

Pete Briggs picked himself up shakily from the floor. "I—I give up!" he croaked. "I—I thought this robber, I saw you chasin', would wake up in my cabin, after I slugged him, and make a getaway out of this part of the country as fast as he could travel! I—I took the cash out of the money-box, and threw the box into the creek. I put the cash in my saddlebags, and—"

"If you'd been on the level, Briggs, you might have collected an honest thousand dollars' reward for capturin' Buck, instead of stealin' the box of murder money," rasped Walt.

Pete Briggs looked sick. "I—I didn't know there was a reward offered," he blurted.

"A crook always gets the worst of the deal, when the devil settles with him," said Walt. "This is the *pay-off* for you, Briggs, an' for Buck Kellerman. The devil is a mighty tough paymaster!"

As Walt left the ranch with his prisoners, he saw a look in Stella Blaney's eyes that told him plainly enough how he stood. "Come back as soon as you can, Walt," she called out, as he rode away. "I—I need you. I'll always need you, Walt."

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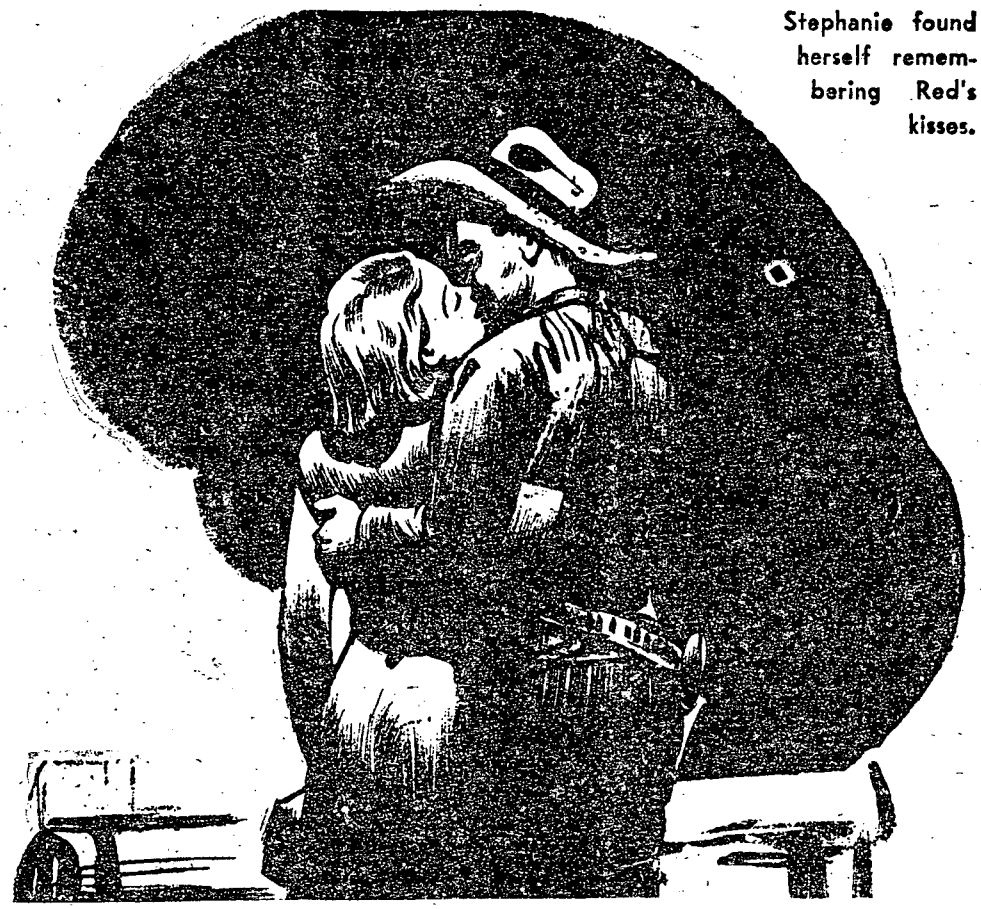

Stephanie found herself remembering Red's kisses.

It's bad enough that the stagecoach can't seem to make a single run without a hold-up, but when a road-agent starts stealing kisses from the law, too...

Lady Sheriff Sees Red!

By Barbara L. Bonham

STEPHANIE LAWSON shifted the big gun which lay across her knees and took a firmer grip on the driver's seat atop the stagecoach. Her movement caught the attention of Andy, the grizzled old driver, and she flushed hotly feeling his eyes upon her.

Thinks I've gone in over my head this time, she thought angrily. *I'll show him. I'll show them all that I can do as good a job as sheriff as any man. They won't be sorry they let me take over when Uncle Mort died. He was the best sheriff Red Rock ever had and I'll finish out his term if it kills me!* She started. *And it might do just that if I'm not careful. This job is by far the biggest I've come up against yet. I've got to stop these stagecoach*

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robberies. The railroad has lost its payroll gold three times already, always when it's being shipped from Ben Walters' bank to the railroad office in Pine Junction.

She ran the toe of her boot over the top of the iron chest which lay at her feet. She smiled, reassured. Ben didn't have to worry about the railroad getting its gold shipment this time. She'd see that the gold arrived safely at the railroad station or know the reason why. The smile erased the tense lines that had pulled at her attractive face and her full, humorous mouth softened. Eyes that matched the summer sky above her blonde head examined the surrounding countryside carefully.

Nothing. This was too good to be true. The sunlight gleamed on the sheriff's badge which was pinned to her shirt as she turned to look back over the road the stagecoach had already traveled. The heavy metal star-shaped badge looked strange on such an unmistakably feminine breast.

The gleam of sunlight reflected by the badge flashed squarely in the driver's eyes and he smiled. "Steve," he shouted above the din of coach wheels and horse's hooves, "what do you think you could do if those two bandits held up this here stage again?"

Steve turned around and looked up at Andy. Her eyes flashed angrily and her voice was stern with determination. "You can bet your boots I'd do a whole lot more than that lily-livered deputy Jed Silver who rode gun with you last time."

"Now there, gal, don't be too hard on Jed. He didn't have a chance to fire a single shot. They were too fast for us. He tried and got a bullet in the shoulder for his trouble."

Steve thrust out a chin which was ridiculously soft despite its stubbornness, and remained silent.

"Why don't you marry Ben and quit this job, Steve?"

Startled at the abrupt switch in the conversation Steve answered sharply. "Reckon that's my business."

"Reckon it is," the craggy old driver agreed, "but I know it isn't 'cause he hasn't asked you. He's made no bones about wanting you to marry him for the past couple of years. If I—"

His next words were cut off by the sound of a shot. The bullet whizzed high over their heads and almost in the same instant, it seemed, a voice at Steve's elbow shouted, "Don't reach for your gun!" and to Andy, "Stop the stagecoach!"

Steve whirled and found herself looking down into a pair of blue eyes that glinted as coldly as the gun barrel which was pointed directly at her. A mere wiggle of her little finger would have sent a bullet ripping into her chest.

ANDY HAD stopped the horses in a matter of seconds and the stagecoach now stood rocking on its wheels after its abrupt stop. The two squealing lady passengers and a fidgety little drummer didn't even rate a glance from the lone bandit.

"Keep quiet and you won't get hurt," the gunman yelled at them over his shoulder. "Now, miss, just hand down that iron box there under your feet."

"I will not," Steve said defiantly.

Just for a moment the masked man stiffened and then his eyes above the black kerchief which covered the rest of his face crinkled. "Throw it down, old timer," he said to Andy without taking his eyes from Steve.

"Yes sir," Andy replied, scrambling to obey.

The iron box fell in the dust at the feet of the bandit's horse. Reaching out quickly the masked man snatched the big gun from Steve's knees, snagged the iron box by one handle with the barrel of the gun and pulled it some distance from the stagecoach. All this without a single waver of his eyes or gun.

Then came the most surprising move of all. The big bandit shot out a long arm and lifted Steve right off the driv-

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er's seat and deposited her across the saddle in front of him.

The suddenness of the move paralyzed Steve for a moment and then she gasped and started fighting like a wildcat, a captured wildcat, for captured she was. Bound by an arm strong as an iron band, she could do little but wiggle and kick feebly. Her face was pressed so tightly against the man's broad chest she couldn't even yell.

Rage shot through her like a hot flame and set her blood pounding in her ears until she hardly heard the bandit's orders to Andy.

"Don't move an inch, old-timer, and don't try any funny tricks or your pretty companion here will get a bullet through her heart." His eyes crinkled again. "What I've got to do will only take a minute anyway."

Steve felt the laughter rumbling in his huge chest as the horse wheeled and galloped to the shade of a nearby tree.

"And now, my fiery beauty," he said pulling the horse up short. The words, Steve found as she leaned back far enough to look up into his eyes, were meant not for the horse but for her.

The way his glance stole over her made Steve blurt out hastily, "You touch me and I'll—I'll scratch your eyes out!"

The man yelped with laughter. "I don't doubt your word or your ability, but don't you think you're a little late seeing as how I've already got you in my arms."

His laughter and his cocksureness infuriated Steve even further and her fury gave her added strength.

She managed to twist an arm free and quick as a flash she reached up and yanked off the bandit's mask. She had only a quick glimpse of red hair above the ears, freckled, pleasantly homely face and a clefted chin before the wide grinning mouth came down on hers hard.

She began flailing him with her one free arm but she might as well have beat against a brick wall. Rage and the vise-like arm around her made it almost impossible to breathe. For a moment she thought her lungs would burst from lack of air, and then suddenly his mouth moved ever so slightly so that her nose lay lightly against his cheek. Strangely enough, Steve found it just as difficult to breathe as before. And it wasn't rage now which made the blood pound in her head.

THE ARM which only a moment before had been beating desperately against the bandit's broad chest now crept up around his neck and her mouth became warm and alive beneath his.

Tearing his mouth away from hers, the bandit gazed down at her for a moment, breathing heavily. Then jabbing his heel sharply against his horse's flank he sent the animal galloping back to the stagecoach.

By this time Steve had recovered her poise and put up a pretty good fight for the benefit of Andy and the passengers inside the coach. It was only a half-hearted struggle, however, she was chagrined to discover. What was wrong with her? She should have been thoroughly enraged but all she felt was weakness and a fluttery feeling in her stomach.

"Let me go, you brute!" she shouted with as much indignation as she could manage.

"Anything for a lady," the bandit said, swinging her up on the driver's seat. Chuckling through the mask he had pulled back up over his face he remarked, "And you are a lady, I find. I'm amazed. You dress and behave like a man, but you kiss like a woman. You're wasting your time as sheriff, believe me. That is what that star on your chest means, isn't it?"

Choking with sure enough rage now, Steve noted the man's glance lingering on the spot where the badge was pinned to her shirt.

"Oh!" she gasped and cracked the driver's whip over the backs of the

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horses, sending the stagecoach off in a cloud of dust.

She felt rather than heard Andy's laughter and it made her even more furious. She cracked the whip over the backs of the horses again and was rewarded by the screams of fright which emanated from the rear of the stagecoach.

"Easy there, gal," Andy shouted. "No need to wreck this here stagecoach just 'cause you're mad at that black-masked, gun-totin' Cassanova," and he grabbed the whip out of her hand which suddenly went limp.

"I'll have his hide for this!" Steve swore, shaken and close to tears from anger and humiliation.

Andy, who had seen everything that happened, knew what was troubling Steve most. He hadn't missed that soft arm which had stolen beyond its will around the bandit's neck.

In an effort to divert Steve's mind from that one moment of weakness, Andy said, "That feller wasn't the same one that held me up last week. This one was a lot bigger and had red hair. Besides that hombre last week had a short, pudgy pal helping him." Andy chuckled. "This boy didn't need help, did he?"

Ignoring Andy's last remark, Steve asked, "Are you sure this wasn't the same one who stole the gold shipment last time?"

"Stake my life on it. This one was different, even acted different. Never have seen a hold-up man act like he did." Andy chuckled again.

"I'll appreciate it if you'll keep your remarks to yourself," Steve said sharply.

"Anything you say, miss. I was just— Well, I'll be!"

The cause of his exclamation was a cloud of dust to the right and two masked horsemen emerging from it. The sun glinted blindingly on their drawn guns. There was no use trying to outrun them.

"Whoa! Whoa, there," Andy yelled at the horses.

Speechless with amazement, Steve watched the two strangers approach the stagecoach. Two holdups within a matter of minutes! It was unbelievable!

"What do you want?" she shouted down at the two men as the stagecoach came to a quivering stop.

"The gold shipment," the thin, dark one who was covering herself and Andy replied. "Hand it down." The other one was keeping watch over the passengers.

"You're a little late, fella," Steve said; "we were held up a few miles back."

A dry chuckle escaped her at the sight of the man's sagging jaw and the consternation which appeared in his face at her news.

AT THE sound of her chuckle he recovered himself. "Stop the funny stuff, sister, and hand over that box," he demanded.

"But I don't have it," Steve insisted.

"She's telling the truth," Andy put in; "some feller stopped us back aways and took the box full of gold."

"What's the trouble up there?" the short, pudgy gunman called from the rear.

"Says they were held up several miles back and haven't got the gold," the thin man called back without shifting his glance from Steve and Andy. His gray eyes were cold and menacing. "You'd better be telling the truth or the both of you'll end up as buzzard meat."

Steve shrugged her shoulders. "Look for yourself."

The man stared at her for a moment and then yelled over his shoulder to his companion, "See if the chest is back there," and he proceeded to search every corner of the driver's seat with his sharp eyes without moving a muscle—or his gun. Steve could see it would be hopeless to try anything.

"Nothing back here," the man from the rear announced.

"Humm. Nothing up here either,"

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the other reluctantly admitted. "If this is some trick," he said, his eyes glinting dangerously, "you'll pay for it."

"You're a suspicious cuss," Andy said sourly; "how long do we have to sit here?"

"In a hurry, grandpa? Well, we'll help you get started." The man fired his gun in the air and the horses were off like lightning.

"Now those are the fellers that took the gold last time," Andy explained when he had got the horses under control again. "They kinda got crossed up this time. Can't understand it. Where'd that red-headed bandit come from?" Shaking his head musingly from time to time, Andy drove the rest of the way to Pine Junction in silence. Steve too was puzzled about the events of the past few hours. She was grateful for Andy's silence. It gave her a chance to do some thinking.

She tried to figure out the meaning of the two holdups, but the answer kept eluding her. Every time she neared a solution, the red-headed gunman's face came back to her and the feel of his kiss was once again warm on her lips. What a nerve he had had! She'd—she'd. Well, what wouldn't she do if she could only capture him. And her time would come, she told herself.

It wasn't easy for her to explain to the man at the railroad office that she, the sheriff, had allowed the railroad's gold to be stolen from the stagecoach while she was on it. The man's ungraciousness increased her hurt pride. When she finally left the office she was still stinging from the man's obvious contempt.

Explaining to Ben was even harder.

"He came up out of nowhere, Ben; we didn't have a chance. It would have been curtains if either Andy or I had made a move."

She was sitting on the edge of his desk in the little office at the rear of the bank building. Ben had been leaning back easy and relaxed in his swivel chair until she came to the part about the lone bandit. When she mentioned the fact that there had been only one bandit, he stiffened suddenly and sat up straight.

"Only one man?" he asked, surprise very evident in his pleasant low voice. "But always before there have been two."

Steve nodded and described the red-headed hold-up man. She watched Ben's handsome face as he thoughtfully digested her news. Sometimes she wondered why she didn't accept his proposal and marry him. He was certainly everything a girl looked for in a man. He was good-looking, with dark wavy hair and brown eyes fringed with thick sooty lashes. His figure, though not tall, was muscular and well-proportioned. And what was more, he always made her feel like a lady and that was an unusual and delicious experience for Steve. Especially since she'd become sheriff. But this was no time to be thinking about that. Something had to be done to stop those stage holdups.

"WHERE WAS it he jumped you?" Ben asked finally.

Steve thought for a moment. "It was just this side of Box Butte. He must have hidden himself in those rocks there."

"I see." He looked quite disturbed.

"Look, Ben. I'm awfully sorry. I thought by riding gun on the stage myself I could prevent the gold shipment being stolen again, but I failed. However, I won't fail again. I've had a chance to do some thinking and I've got a new plan."

The troubled look in Ben's eyes gave way to one of amusement at the eagerness in her voice. "Now, Steve. You don't mean to tell me you're going to try again. Why, isn't it plain enough now that this isn't a woman's job? Why don't you appoint a new deputy until Jed's arm heals and let him ride with Andy as guard."

Steve shook her head stubbornly. "Nothing doing. This is my job and I'm going to do it to the best of my

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ability. And I'll stop those robberies and see those bandits behind bars or my name isn't Stephanie Lawson."

Ben smiled as he rose from his chair and went toward her. "Speaking of names, how about changing yours to Stephanie Walters. How many proposals does this make? Four? Five?" Close to her now, he pulled her up off the edge of the desk and into his arms. "How about it, Steve, honey? Don't you think you've kept me waiting long enough?"

"Ben, I—" she began but his mouth came down hard on hers stopping the words. Always before, Ben's kisses had set her tingling but now the hot, leisurely kiss did nothing to her. She found herself remembering the thorough job of kissing she had undergone that morning in the arms of the red-headed bandit. His freckled, homely face swam before her now and against her will she recalled how she had thrilled to his kiss.

She was still remembering when Ben's kiss ended and he looked down at her. Something of the feeling her memory had evoked must have shown in her face for Ben drew in his breath sharply.

"I didn't realize you found my kisses so stirring," he murmured. His tone was slightly amused but it couldn't hide the fact that he was left shaken by the kiss.

Steve slowly opened her eyes and when she saw Ben's dark handsome face where the grinning, freckled one had been, she was brought sharply back to the present. "Oh," she said sharply and pushed herself out of Ben's arms. For heaven's sake, what had she been thinking of! A bandit's kiss, of all things!

Ben was gazing at her in complete puzzlement and before he could say anything, she made a vague reference to some work she had to do and left the office hurriedly.

Outside, the air was hot and full of the dust that rose from Red Rock's main street. As she made her way along the rough wooden walk to the sheriff's office, she thought, *What on earth is wrong with me? What made me think of that red-headed varmit? And right when Ben was kissing me too. I'll get him if it's the last thing I do!* She meant the bandit. *I hate him! Lord, how I hate him!* But remembering that the warm feeling she had inside when she remembered his kiss wasn't like any hatred she'd ever felt before.

WHEN THE stage started out on its run from Red Rock to Pine Junction the next week with its shipment of gold, Steve was on it once again. Only this time she rode inside the coach and Jake Davis, an old friend of her Uncle Mort's and a dead shot with a rifle, rode gun up on the driver's seat beside Andy. This was the new plan she had mentioned to Ben. Riding back there alone, she'd have the element of surprise on her side because it wasn't likely anyone would expect trouble from someone inside the coach. There were no other passengers. She had seen to that. She didn't want innocent people getting hurt.

The stage had barely left Red Rock behind when trouble struck. Steve had just situated herself on one of the seats in a position which would give her a vantage point to the rear and each side when she heard a shot from up front and a chorus of yells. For a few brief moments, the stagecoach strained to outrun the hold-up men, but it was no use. Finally, Steve heard Andy's loud "whoa" and gradually the stage came to a lurching stop.

Cautiously, taking care not to let herself be seen, Steve peeked through a side window. Two masked men rode up in a choking cloud of dust. One of them pulled his horse up right beside the driver's seat and, with drawn gun, forced Andy and Jake to drop their guns. The other masked rider was coming straight to the rear of the coach. Steve swung her gun into po-

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sition and fired. The man yelped and grabbed for his right shoulder, dropping his gun as he did so.

"It's the sheriff," he shouted to his companion, and before Steve could fire again she heard the man up front yell, "Hold your fire or your pals up front here will get a bullet through their brains."

It was no use. She didn't dare fire another shot. The tone of the bandit's voice made it plain he meant every word he said. Biting back tears of anger and frustration, Steve held her fire as she heard Andy comply with the gunman's orders to hand over the strong box full of gold. Then the team of horses leapt forward in response to a shot in the air from the man's gun. Steve fired her own gun in a last attempt, but the coach was swaying so violently her bullet went wild.

Unable to choke back her disappointment any longer, Steve gave vent to bitter tears. She had failed again. What was she going to do? Maybe the job *was* too much for her; maybe she *should* resign and let them put a man in her place. She could marry Ben then and settle down to a nice quiet life. Surely she could make a better wife than a sheriff.

This was the pattern of her thoughts for the next few miles until she felt the stage drawing to a stop. Pine Junction already? She wiped her eyes on a sleeve and leaned out the window. What she saw left her spluttering with rage. They weren't in Pine Junction! The red-headed snake who had held them up last trip had appeared again. Only this time, it was he who was out of luck. Wild, hysterical laughter burst from Steve's lips and it wasn't until she felt a stinging slap on her face that she regained her senses. Both Andy and Jake were bending over her and the red-head was looking on, his gun barrel poked inside the window.

"Stand back. Let her have some air," the gunman ordered. Above his mask his blue eyes were concerned. "You all right now?" he asked gruffly as she leaned back against the seat.

She attempted a sharp retort but could only nod weakly.

"Get back up front," he told the other two men. "And no funny business unless you want the lady to get hurt."

AFTER SHOOTING a couple of helpless looks at her, Andy and Jake made their way back to the front of the stage. The masked rider dismounted and pulled open the coach door. For one wild moment as he leaned over her, his face only inches away from her own, Steve thought he was going to kiss her and she felt a warm weakness invade her body. She hadn't the strength to fight him off. What's more, she didn't want to.

But he didn't kiss her. Instead he said savagely, "You little fool! Don't you know you can get hurt playing this game? This is a man's job. You've got no business playing sheriff." And with one swift movement he was mounted and gone.

His words had given Steve new life. How dare he call her a fool! She'd show him; she'd show them all. Next time the gold was due for shipment, she'd take it herself on horseback. She'd take the short cut to Pine Junction alone. She'd get that gold through to the railroad office if it was the last thing she did.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" she shouted to Andy. "Let's make tracks."

She heard the whip crack, felt the horses spring into action and the next instant the coach was off in a cloud of dust.

She didn't go to Ben this time and admit her failure. Rather he came to her. And it might have been her imagination but she thought she saw triumph written in his handsome face.

"Look, Steve. For the last time, won't you give up this nonsense? Marry me and forget about being a sheriff and concentrate on being a wife." She

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felt the hard muscles of his body under his impeccably tailored broadcloth jacket as he pulled her close.

"Give up?" she asked in astonishment. "Never; I'll die first," and frightened by her own remark, she pulled away from him and ran upstairs to her room.

A few weeks later when the gold was due to be shipped once more, the stage left for Pine Junction on schedule and beneath old Andy's feet was an iron box. But there was no gold in it, only sand, and this amazing secret was known only to Steve.

An hour after the stage left, Steve mounted Star, her palimino and sneaked out of town. Across her saddle was the iron chest containing the railroad's gold. This time there would be no slip ups. She'd take a short cut to Pine Junction and with the iron box on the stage as decoy, she could carry the real chest to its destination without trouble.

But she was mistaken! She hadn't covered half the distance when a rider suddenly appeared from out of a tiny grove of trees and cut her off.

Oh, no! It couldn't be! But it was. It was the red-headed bandit. This time he was without his mask but not without his gun. It remained pointed squarely at her until she obeyed his barked order to drop her gun.

"Now get down off that horse," he said sharply.

Steve started to protest but knowing it was useless, she shrugged and dismounted, dropping the chest to the ground before she did so.

WHEN SHE stood before him, defenseless and dismounted, the gunman replaced his gun in its holster and dropped down beside her. His freckled, pleasantly homely face was grim and his blue eyes hard as he said, "I thought you'd pull something like this. You haven't a grain of horse sense in that purty head of yours, have you?"

"Why, you— I don't have to stand here and let you insult me," Steve said, spluttering with rage.

"Well, you're going to." The man smiled, but it was a tight angry smile. "Do you know what you've been risking your neck for? Here, I'll show you." With one movement he shot the lock from the iron chest and lifted the lid with the tip of his boot.

Steve gazed down in stunned amazement. There was no gold in that box. Just a lot of old iron.

"But, I don't understand," she gasped.

"Then I'll explain it." His voice softened a little. "Your boy friend, Ben, has been shipping a box full of iron to the railroad instead of the gold he was supposed to ship. He had a couple of his boys hold up the stage each time the box was shipped so no one would find out about his crooked little game. That gold never left the bank; he kept it all nice and safe for himself."

"But how do you fit in the picture?" Steve asked, her confusion growing by the minute.

"I'm an agent for the railroad," he announced and seeing relief mingle with the surprise on her face, he grinned for the first time.

It was an engaging grin and Steve wasn't sure whether the warmth that spread through her was relief at finding herself in the hands of a railroad agent instead of a bandit or something else.

"The railroad suspected there was dirty work afoot and sent me to find out. I held up the stage and found iron in that box instead of gold. That gave us all the evidence we needed. We've been waiting for the Federal authorities to come out to Red Rock and make the arrest. We got word they were arriving today. They're probably making the arrests this very minute."

"Ben—a crook?" Steve asked in-

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credulously. She shook her head dazedly. "But why did you hold us up last time if you already had the evidence? And what are you doing here now?"

This time the red-head's grin threatened to split his face. "As for holding up the stage again, a little more evidence wouldn't have hurt anything. Besides I wanted to keep an eye on you. That's why I'm here now. You made it pretty plain you didn't have sense enough to take care of yourself, so I decided to do it for you."

He reached out and pulled her into his arms. The next instant his mouth closed over hers and a wild searing flame which started at her mouth swept through her body. Her hands flattened against his back and pressed him even closer until she felt his heart beating against her like an untamed thing.

Finally he leaned back and asked, "Do I get the job?"

Steve shook her head to clear away the fog which enveloped it. "What job?" she asked faintly.

"The job of taking care of you, of making you give up this sheriff business and making you into a wife."

"Why, sir, I don't even know your name," she replied coyly, making a nest of kisses under his ear.

He drew back and gazed down at her a moment before declaring with an absolutely straight face, "My name's Red."

"Oh, no!" she cried and broke into peels of laughter that left her gasping. She just had time to catch her breath before Red's grinning mouth claimed hers again and she knew beyond a question of a doubt that he got the job. But definitely!

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The Chief Plays Chess

Fact Feature by Harold Gluck

CHIEF BIG NOSE was deep in thought. Seated on a packing case in Major John Perry's tent, the redskin had a serious problem to solve. The Pawnee leader was about middle height, strong and well-built, about sixty years of age, and his hair was turning to snow. He was dressed in a blue military coat, though the rest of his body was naked, except for his breech cloth and moccasins.

"If I move my knight, I am afraid you will soon be able to get to my queen," he said to his opponent, seated directly opposite him from a home-made table. Major Perry couldn't help smiling. In the year that he had taught his Indian friend the rudiments of chess, he found himself with a worthy opponent on hand to pass the long hours of the day. The officer was a red-headed, brown-eyed man, six feet, one inch in height and a regular bear in fight. His scouts had been the salvation of many a small town along the border.

"If you don't move your knight, I'll get to your queen," pointed out the Major.

Whatever the Indian had planned as his next move would have to wait till some future time, for the flap of the tent moved aside and Sergeant Charley Cliff saluted. "The General's compliments, Sir. Could you and Chief Big Nose come at once to his quarters. A dispatch rider has just brought an important message."

The two men arose from their seats and left the tent. Around them were the lodges of the scouts who lived outside the walls of Fort Jackson.

"Chess may be a good game for white men to play, and you say it is good to plan for war. But the Indian mind does not see war the same way as the white man. You have been successful as our leader only because you can see fighting from our point of view," the Indian mentioned to his friend as the gate to the fort swung open for them to enter. Major Perry shook his head in the negative. "War is war, regardless of with whom you fight. The secret of winning any fight is to outguess your enemy, lead him into a trap, and then smash him so completely that he can never fight again."

The two men entered a large room, decorated with maps, guns, and hunting trophies. General Howard Crimbley arose to greet his most honored fighting-man. Crimbley was a stocky built West-Pointer who knew his own limitations—which was something rare among the officers sent from the east to handle the indian trouble. He pointed to an open letter on his desk. *Cunning Fox has crossed the border. He has cut the telegraph line from Lizard Point to Howard Station. He raided the settlement at Johnson Crossing and massacred all the people.*

Chief Big Nose did something rare for an Indian; he betrayed his own emotions in front of the white men. At the mention of the man he hated most, his entire frame began to tremble. Then he checked himself. There was no need of a word of explanation or appology; Cunning Fox had killed Chief Big Nose's wife and two grown sons. The Indian had but one ambition

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before he died—to avenge his honor; to do that he was willing to be counted as a white man's soldier.

The General came right to the point. "Major, whatever you think best to do under the situation, you have the power to make all the necessary decisions."

The reply came almost automatic. "We'll be ready to leave within an hour. All I want is three pack horses loaded with rifle ammunition. The rest of the supplies we have ourselves." There were two salutes, and Major Perry and his Indian friend retraced their footsteps to their own quarters.

GENERAL Crimbley went to the window and watched the two men as they left the fort. He, like every other officer, knew of the story that had brought the fighting Pawnee scouts into existence. It had taken place ten years ago while Lieutenant Perry, fresh from West Point, had gone out with a small patrol. They had stumbled into fighting between Cunning Fox and his men and the peaceful Pawnee village that was being raided for women and slaves. The Pawnees had only bows and arrows and a few muskets to defend themselves. Perry and his men fought with the Pawnees and forced the invaders back. The toll had been high, with most of the patrol either killed or wounded. And Chief Big Nose lost his family that memorable day. But from it was born an idea—to create a fighting force that could handle enemy Indians. For smarting under the stigma of defeat Chief Big Nose wanted his revenge. So he and the man who saved him became blood brothers.

Major Perry was mounted on a beautiful black of glossy skin, clean and well-made limbs, spirited eyes, expanded nostrils, and full of proud gallant action. The officer wore his blue trousers, a shirt, and a handkerchief around his neck. From his hip there was a full cartridge belt, and two pearl-handled, deadly Colts in their holsters. The scabbard on his horse caried a new repeating rifle. At the side of his horse, there was a mustang of the prairie, a roan with a chocolate-colored stripe down his backbone and on it rode Chief Big Nose. Behind them were almost a hundred of the Pawnee scouts, each armed with revolver, repeating rifle, and a sharp-edged scalping knife. Gone forever was the peaceful spirit within them; they were going to make coup or not return alive.

One thing bothered Major Perry, but he was too wise to show it or ask the question from his Indian friend. Why was every scout wearing a regulation army coat, though dressed in breech cloth? With hard riding they would reach Lizard Point in two days.

The telegraph operator at Lizard Point rushed for his rifle as he saw a group of mounted men head in his direction. He held his fire, as he recognized Major Perry. "Sure glad to see you," was his greetings. "Sort of got the jitters with Cunning Fox on the warpath. Anything I can do?"

Major Perry shook his head. "We are going to camp here for a day or two. Cunning Fox has a superstitious dread of the telegraph line which, like other Indians, he calls 'talking wire.' When passing under or near it on marauding expeditions, he always cuts and pulls down a portion of it to prevent it from telling on him. He cut the line on his last raid. I want messages to every station to inform you at once of any break in the line. Let's put Cunning Fox's superstition to good use."

On the second day, the operator had the desired news. "The line is down at Apple Creek stage station; unable to get the operator."

IN RECORD time, Major Perry and his scouts were on their mounts and headed in the direction of the stage station. Riding at top speed, they could reach their destination in about three hours.

Cunning Fox and his renegade Indians were in complete control of the

[*Turn To Page 96*]

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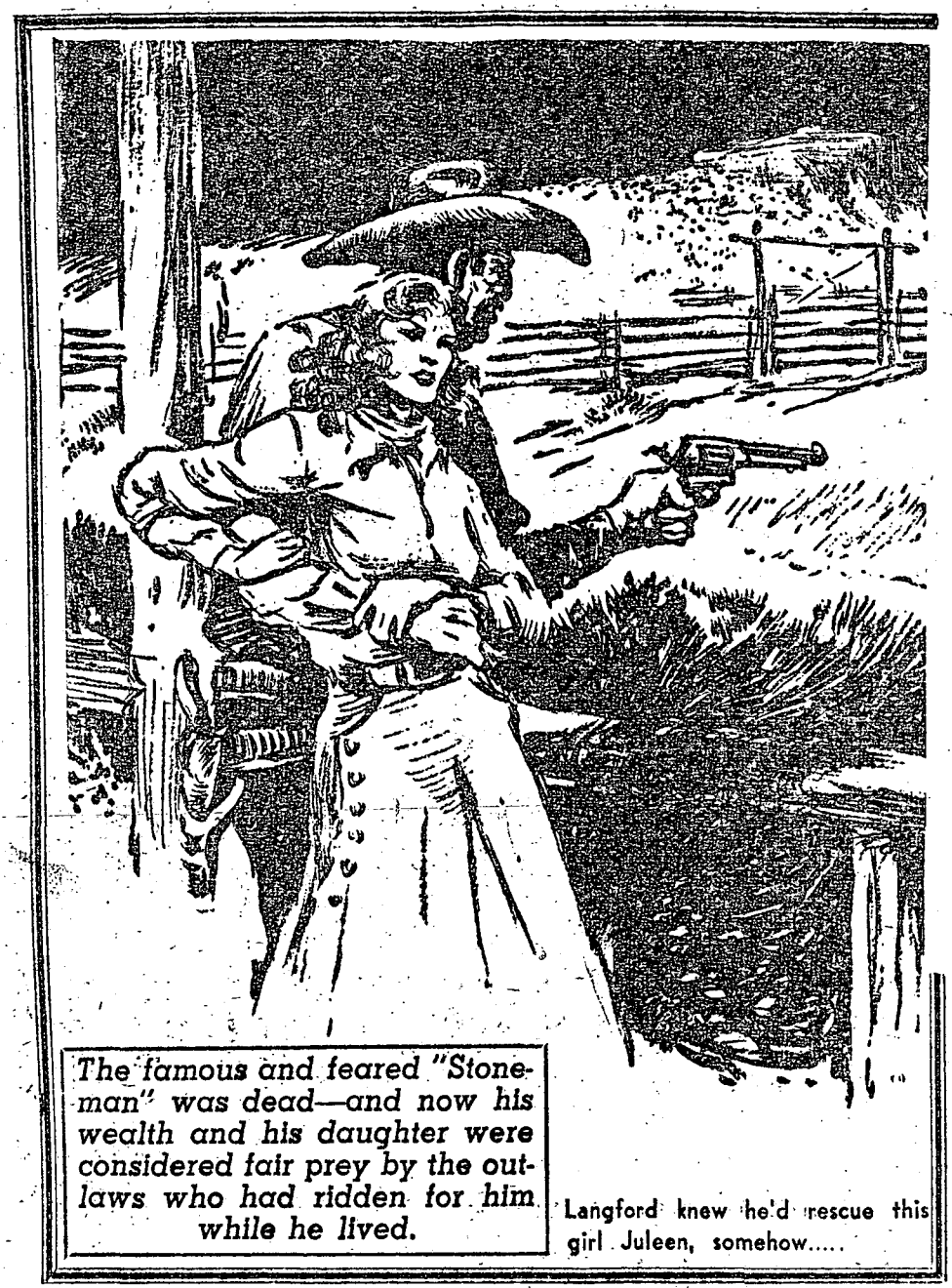

The famous and feared "Stoneman" was dead—and now his wealth and his daughter were considered fair prey by the outlaws who had ridden for him while he lived.

Langford knew he'd rescue this girl Juleen, somehow.....

YOUNG DICK LANGFORD stood straight and stiff, his black eyes narrowing as he glanced around the cabin. He was fighting the urge to look back over his shoulder at the three men grouped together on the edge of the cliff; he prayed that the cloud of dust on the trail far down in the valley would hold their interest long enough for him to search their belongings.

Langford was near the end of a long and persistent search for a murdering polecat; and he wanted only to know which of these three outlaws owned the peculiar nugget ring he had seen lying on the shelf when he first entered their cabin several weeks ago.

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FEATURE NOVEL OF A BITTER QUEST

By Zella Pearsol

THE STONEMAN OF TOHAY VALLEY

All his life, Dick Langford had been following a vengeance trail, even though he sickened at the thought of how it would end. Then he found he'd have to help someone else, in order to save his own skin, and . . .

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That ring had brought back vivid, terrible memories. Sharply silhouetted against the dark curtain of his youth, the ring had flung its image, never to be erased. And with it was the knotty hand to which it had belonged; a clutching hand, which clutched with its claw-like fingers the throat of his brother Tom, strangling him—killing him.

Again, that ghastly scene, stamped on his ten-year old mind, fifteen years ago, was clear before him and Dick cursed the childish mind which, in fright and horror, had focused only on the instrument of death, the hands. That same childish mind had sworn to avenge his brother's death; an oath made by a ten-year old boy and which had grown stronger with the years. Dick Langford worshipped his brother's memory, for the big, kind-hearted Tom had been the only family he'd remembered.

Young Langford was bitterly aware of the suspicions in the minds of the three outlaws. Most frank in his dislike for Dick was Luke Hornby, six feet of brawn, but minus one arm—the ruler of his own small kingdom. Next was Al Jason, slinky, soft-voiced, and with a look in his eyes which made women shiver and get out of his sight as quickly as possible.

And then Doc, with the face of a saint and the soul of a demon. In many ways Doc had let Langford know he didn't trust him. Doc was a strange hombre, surely. Ready to fight at the drop of a hat, but ready to administer aid and comfort when a man or an animal was hurt. Dick marveled at the gentleness of the gnarled old hands. Dick looked at the tight bandage Doc had made him wear till his badly crushed wrist was well again.

Langford grinned wryly as he reflected that it was his clumsy fall, when his horse had stumbled, which caused him to seek aid from these three outlaws holed up high on the Rimrock. Even now, he couldn't understand his weird feeling when he had been reluctantly invited into their cabin. He had stood, holding his throbbing arm, staring from one to the other, while once more he was a boy of ten and through that haze of horror he heard the pounding of three galloping horses fading away in the darkness.

Later, he had felt little surprise when he spied the peculiar nugget ring on the shelf. But it had disappeared without his knowing to which it belonged. He had studied their gnarled and knotty hands; Jason's seemed the more claw-like of the three, but Dick knew his only course was to team up with them if possible. He'd watch his chance to make certain the ownership of the ring and then—as he had so often visualized—shoot the life out of his brother's murderer.

FOR MANY days young Langford had awaited an opportunity to search the cabin; now he moved quickly across the room on the toes of his boots. Careful to make no noise on the rough board floor, he pulled a small leather trunk from under one of the bunks and opened it. He had been wanting desperately to search Hornby's trunk, but as he delved into all corners, a look of disappointment crossed his face; the gold-nugget ring was not in the trunk.

A squeaky door hinge brought Dick to his feet and he stared stupidly into the keen gray eyes of Doc. Surprise flared up in Doc's face and he grinned slyly.

"Looking for something, Langford?" he asked. "Maybe I can help."

Dick quickly overcame his confusion and his eyes were as keen as the Doc's as he grinned back at him. "Nothing much, Doc—just one of those old maps. Hornby has stored away; thought I might ride back in the hills."

"Yeah?" Doc drawled.

Dick saw Doc's head jerk to face

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the door, to peer intently down the trail.

"There's a stranger ridin' up!" Doc mumbled excitedly, hurrying from the cabin.

Langford drew a long breath as he pushed the trunk back under the bunk, then followed the older man out to the edge of the cliff where Hornby and Jason were watching the laborious approach of a rider.

Langford glanced down the winding trail and could just make out a coal-black horse disappearing around a sharp bend. The three outlaws were leaning over the edge of the cliff, anxious to catch sight of the intruder.

Luke Hornby was nervously tossing up his plug of tobacco, expertly catching it in his one hand. "Anybody know that hombre?" he asked as the rider finally came into view.

Negative grunts came from the two men as each shuffled about.

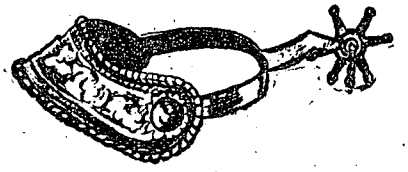
Al Jason was the first to recognize the rider. "Why, it's old Herb Knowles from over Bullpine way!" he exclaimed. "Wonder what he's doing here—riding hard, too."

THE RIDER came nearer, pulled to a halt. A malicious grin spread over his leathered face. "Damned if it ain't Luke Hornby, Al Jason and the Doc!" he said, surprise in his voice. "Didn't know I was gettin' on such hallowed ground." He threw a curious look at Dick.

"This here's Dick Langford," Jason spoke up quickly. "He stumbled to our door like a wounded coyote a while back, but Doc patched him up."

"Now that we're all acquainted—what do you want, Knowles?" said Hornby.

"I'd like a drink for both me and my horse." He slid stiffly from his lathered black stallion. "And for the favor, I'll give you a bit of news. News you've waited a long time to hear."



Hornby pointed to the watering trough, then led the way toward the cabin. Knowles turned his mount, smacking him sharply on the rump; the thirsty horse trotted forward and buried his nose in the water. Gloatingly, between long gulps from the gourd dipper, the old man gave out his astounding news. "Well, gents," he paused showily, "the Stoneman is dead!"

Young Langford watched the reaction of the three outlaws; they were all speechless. Hornby's expression never changed, but he reached into his pocket, pulled out a bottle and handed it to Knowles. The old eyes lit greedily on the amber whiskey.

Al Jason shuffled around, thrust his hands in his pockets and said wonderingly, "So, Bill Stone's dead at last!"

Doc's reactions were the most puzzling. His lower jaw dropped; a stricken look drew his face taut for a fleeting moment, then was gone. He tripped clumsily over a piece of rock as he stumbled past Dick and dropped down on the cabin doorstep.

The silence was heavy while Knowles took a long drink from the bottle. Wiping his mouth on his sleeve, he volunteered more information. "There's the damndest hulla-ba-loo going on down there in Tohay Valley you ever seen. That supposed fortune of Stone's has 'em all crazy. Wasn't more than an hour after the news got around that Bill Stone's own foreman, Burt Moffat, and his skunks, began to search and wreck the out buildings. Hell's sure been a-poppin'."

He stopped a moment to let this information sink in, then continued, "The rest of the boys are heading in from the roundup; be there by sundown tomorrow, I reckon." His blood-

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shot eyes lifted to Luke Hornby with a sharp look. "Every blasted one of them figures they should have the biggest share of the loot. Now they think the gold's hid somewhere in the house. Nobody knows where it is, but I know that if one of them finds it, he won't have a chance; he'll be dead before he gets the feel of the gold in his hands."

Dick saw Hornby's pale, sick-looking face flush with color and saw the determined look that came into his hard eyes as he fumbled with his empty left sleeve.

Knowles had only paused to take another drink from the bottle. "You know what I think, boys?" he drawled. "Well, that gold is right there in the safe—with the Stoneman's precious file of papers!"

Finally, Jason, with a wolfish look in his eyes, broke the deathlike silence. "How about that filly of a gal of Stone's? Is she still there?" He asked in his soft slurring voice.

"She sure is; she's holding her own so far too, with only the Mexican family, José Pereda, his wife and son and a handful of loyal riders to defend the ranch house." He lowered his head. "I sort of feel sorry for Juleen Stone; she's not a bit like her skunk of a Pa, only that she's proud like he was."

With his eyes still cast downward, he started toward his horse, but he had only taken a few steps when Doc arose from the steps and called after him, his voice tense, "Who killed Bill Stone, Knowles?"

Herb Knowles turned quickly, squared his stooped shoulders. "Know who killed Bill Stone?" he burst out, his eyes snapping. "Sure, I know who killed him; I did! I shot him in the back and I'm damned glad I did!" He stared belligerently at the three men silently waiting for him to continue. "Any arguments, gents?" he asked slowly.

DICK LANGFORD was vaguely aware of a curious expression in Doc's eyes. Was it a look of wild hate? It came and went so very quickly that he wasn't sure he had seen correctly.

It seemed as if words were being forced from Herb Knowles' dry lips as he went on, "My boy wanted to marry Juleen, the Stoneman's girl... I found his body lyin' over by the river, a bullet in his back."

Dick knew he'd never forget the look on the old man's face. It was a look of a terrible sorrow; yet he saw a fiendish delight in Knowles' shadowed eyes at the satisfaction of having avenged his son. Knowing this would ultimately be his own emotion if he succeeded in what he had set out to do, a shudder passed through Dick, but he knew it was too late for it to be otherwise.

Knowles shook his fist as he ranted on, "Bill Stone's henchmen could send a bullet into my son's back, but all of his henchmen and scummy outlaws couldn't stop the bullet I sent through *his* yellow back!"

Abruptly, he swung upon his horse, but before he turned to follow the trail, he looked down on them, his sharp eyes going from one to the other. "Yes," he repeated harshly, "I killed the Stoneman and I'm damned glad I did!"

The four men stood watching until he disappeared down the trail.

"So he shot him in the back," mumbled Doc, as they made their way slowly toward the cabin.

There was a bitterness in Doc's voice that Dick couldn't understand.

"Guess he had it coming to him," said Al Jason; "but now he's gone that filly of his needs help."

"Not your kind of help," growled Doc.

This time Dick Langford was sure of the look in Doc's eyes. It puzzled him, made him wonder what was in Doc's mind; how his mind was working. He wondered, too, what Doc had

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really thought when he found him going through Hornby's trunk. Would he tell Hornby? And he wondered if these men could have learned his secret. They were acting too casual for some reason or another.

Suddenly, sharp uneasiness went through young Langford. If he were right, and one of these three outlaws had killed his brother, they might know why he had contrived to stay on; perhaps they had found out who he was and were letting him play out his hand. Perhaps that was why they had so readily agreed that he throw in with them.

He forced his mind back to remember which man seemed most willing to have him join them. It had been Hornby. And it was Al Jason who had, at first, seemed determined to make him feel unwelcome.

THIS WAS a very sinister situation in Tohay Valley. It seemed as if Dick could feel death rustling across the valley, up the slopes and into the granite cliffs of the rimrock. Actually, what part had this Bill Stone played in the valley? He had evidently deserved that nickname, "The Stoneman", for his men had waited till he was dead to swoop down like buzzards to grab the possessions of a dead man, the rightful heritage of a defenseless girl.

Luke Hornby's rasping voice broke into young Langford's thoughts. "At sun-up I'm riding into Tohay. If Burt Moffat thinks he's entitled to the Stoneman's gold, I'll show the skunk how wrong he is. It was easy for Moffat to make a good showing at round-up time when we rustled stock from the hills by the hundreds. But Bill Stone knew how those cattle got there and who put 'em there...and Moffat ain't going to get his dirty hands on those papers in Stone's safe either. I don't believe the Stoneman ever meant to use 'em—only to keep us under his thumb—but in Burt Moffat's hands them papers would bust up our business in the valley. I'm too old a man to pull up stakes now; I'm staying in Tohay, and I'm going to have my share of the gold. What do you hombres say?"

"You can bet I aim to get my share, Luke," Al Jason spoke up quickly.

"Might be other business to settle too," quietly suggested the Doc. Jason glanced curiously at him, a peculiar glint in his eyes, but Doc was intently searching the desert far below, as if seeking a lone rider making his way among the rocks and brush.

Luke Hornby's eyes passed carelessly over Dick, as if hardly conscious of his being there. It gave Langford an uneasy feeling. He had to go with these men; he must stay with them till he knew for sure which man was the one he had been searching for. And he must see those papers in the Stoneman's safe. In that file would be the black history of these three men and he would have his answer. No, he couldn't drop out now, even if it did mean being involved with this gang of outlaws and gunslicks.

2

YOUNG Dick Langford opened his eyes just as dawn was breaking the next morning. He lay for a long minute in the half-sleep of awakening. Suddenly, he became conscious of an aloneness and the quietness settled on him with a heavy foreboding; he jerked himself up on one elbow and peered dazedly around the cabin. The other three bunks were empty, bare of their blankets. Fully awake now, his forehead wrinkled to a bewildered frown as he remembered. This was the day the four of them were to

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ride. The Stoneman—the dead man's gold!

He dressed hurriedly and strode to the closed door. Carefully pulling it open, he heard a low murmur of voices. Langford threw the door open wide and looked out on a strange scene.

The outlaws' horses stood packed and ready. Luke Hornby was stamping out the remains of a fire while Doc hovered near, gesticulating and talking in low tones. Dick jerked alert as he spied Al Jason disappearing through the trees leading Dick's red roan.

His mind worked fast and his eyes were hard. They weren't aiming for him to go with them! Had Doc told them about the trunk episode? Or perhaps Hornby thought that splitting the dead man's loot four ways was uncalled-for. They were taking a sneaky way to see that he stayed behind, running his roan off. Well, he *was* going with them; he was going to see those papers in the safe at the Stone Ranch! Anger flared up within Dick at the slinky Jason.

"Mornin' gents!" he called loudly as he stepped from the door, "I'll be with you in a jiffy." Striding forward he spoke directly to Jason, "What did my horse do, cut loose, Jason? Thanks for going after him, fella. You can let him go now; he'll come to me."

At the sound of Dick's voice the roan gave a soft nicker of recognition and started toward him. Dick could feel Hornby's and Doc's sharp stares.

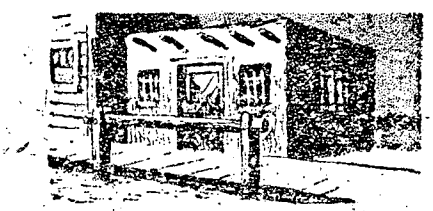
"So, you weren't dead!" Doc spoke up. "You sure were sleeping that way." Puzzled, Dick sensed an undercurrent of relief in Doc's voice as he went on, "Snap it up, lad; we're about ready to ride."

Langford lost no time and they were soon headed down the trail, southward towards the cattle empire of Bill Stone. They descended into the fertile land of Tohay Valley, where huge herds of cattle grazed and grew fat on the sparse but nourishing desert growths.

Hornby gruffly motioned Dick on ahead, and that is how he rode—in the lead, the three outlaws at his back. Only where the trail was wide enough so they could ride two abreast, did Doc ride by Dick's side; Luke Hornby and Al Jason paired in the rear.

A wave of anger swept over young Langford. He was suddenly infuriated at being on the trail with these rustlers. At being under suspicion and at their mercy, of which he knew they had little. And at being on this mission of their greed, of which he was a thing apart.

He tried to visualize the man, the news of whose death had struck at the very roots of his outlaw empire, as if struck by the very force of nature's revenge. The structure he had built had toppled and fallen; now bedlam reigned in Tohay Valley. King of outlaws, Bill Stone had ruled by fear—fear of himself and dread of the facts he kept in a file, carefully locked in the safe in his home; facts about the life of each outlaw. Because he knew their most intimate histories, he could demand and get anything he wanted. Perhaps, Dick reasoned, the three men riding behind him wanted this tell-tale file more than the Stoneman's gold.



A FLURRY of uneasiness went through Langford as he remembered Jason and Doc discussing the motherless daughter of the dead man. Juleen, they had called her. He grinned sheepishly—funny he should remember her name, he thought. But it was an unusual name.

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He sincerely hoped this Juleen Stone would be strong enough to stand alone and not have her life embittered as his own had been. Whatever her father might have been, they had belonged to each other; now, just as himself, she was left with no one to whom she belonged—no one to turn to for help while these vicious black clouds of trouble were rolling toward her.

For a fleeting instant, Dick was glad he was riding with these men; then, just as quickly, he had an urge to risk breaking from the trail, rather than become involved in someone else's battles. He had had no one to help him fight his battles and now he was anxious to find his brother's killer, get the job over and done—then he was going to take a trail that led to peace and contentment.

As young Dick guided his faithful mount over the unfamiliar trail he realized he had become involved in one of the worst mixups of his rugged life. He knew these three outlaws did not want him in their party, they would welcome the excuse to send a bullet through his head. He felt chills of apprehension race up and down his spine at the thought of his back exposed to them.

Doc, at times, seemed almost friendly; Langford didn't trust him either. The only friends he could trust were his horse and his guns.

At the end of their first long tiresome day, when dusk was slowly turning the desert to a dull silver, Dick saw ahead a narrow river winding its way through the peaceful valley. A quick thrill ran through him as he spied a large grove of cotton-woods—this should be their halting place for the night.

Relieved, he heard Hornby call out, "Turn to the right, Langford; head for the cotton-woods. We'll pitch camp!"

Although weary and anxious to stretch his legs, Dick dreaded the darkness fast enveloping them, for he knew he must be on the alert the whole night. Luke Hornby had not wanted him along, and Hornby wasn't a man to tolerate opposition. All day, Luke's careless slouch in the saddle and his idling gaze had not fooled Dick.

Langford hobbled his roan on the opposite side of the camp from the other horses, then threw his bedroll near him. The grazing was good and he knew the horse wouldn't hobble far. He was aware of quick, hard looks as he re-checked his forty-fives and placed them under his head.

AS HE LAY listening to the river splashing gently against the bank and the soft rustle of the leaves overhead, he would have given anything to be able to relax his tense nerves and fall asleep. He had located each outlaw in his bedroll and soon there were vigorous snores from Doc. Shortly Luke Hornby was breathing loud and regular; impatiently, Dick waited for Jason to join the other two, but he could hear him turning restlessly in the black darkness.

Young Langford shifted uneasily. He wondered about Al Jason with his saintly face. Jason was definitely out of character riding with men, an outlaw of the open plains; but Dick felt that of the three Jason was the most treacherous, that he had plans concerning Bill Stone's girl. There was always a smirk on his face when Juleen was mentioned; Langford was fast beginning to despise this smooth-faced killer.

Strangely, his mind went back to his childhood. His bronzed face softened as he thought of his Aunt Clara and Uncle Jim, who had reached out loving and sympathetic arms as he had turned from his brother's grave, a bitter disillusioned and grief-stricken youngster. Now, Dick knew what a disappointing task they had had, trying to take Tom's place, trying to be a mother and father to him, trying to kill the bitterness in a young heart.

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He was filled with fresh hatred as he thought of the unnatural life that killer had caused him to live by taking the one person left to whom he felt he belonged. But, now, maybe his search was at an end and he would have his revenge and could begin life over. He wanted to see his aunt and uncle again, try to show his gratitude, let them know he wanted to live as they had tried to point the way—and perhaps someday he might even have a home of his own. A soft chuckle escaped him as he tried to picture a constant roof over his head.

From far back in the hills the weird yapping of a coyote broke into his thoughts. A movement attracted his attention from across the camp. Al Jason had also heard the coyote's call. Young Dick scowled, made up his mind he'd keep an alert eye on Jason. With that resolution, he closed his eyes to await some sign that Jason was asleep.

●

A long while later he opened his eyes. Light from a dim half-moon filtered through the trees. Slowly things took shadowy shape before him. Rythmic snores and heavy breathing came from the three bedrolls. Dick's startled, sleep-drugged face slowly relaxed and he grinned guiltily; weariness had won over his resolve to keep awake. But everything was all right.

He supposed he had been overly suspicious of his companions—but something *had* awakened him. Quickly, he looked for his horse. The roan was standing, ears cocked, a few feet away. At that second a twig snapped from the direction of the river. Dick's muscles tensed; he turned cautiously, his hand gliding to his holster. Suddenly, he made out the vague form of a man slipping toward the camp. Dick watched him stop and peer from one sleeper to the other. Then the figure darted silently to the sound sleeping Hornby.

Langford thanked his suspicions that had caused him to bed down apart from the three outlaws. His gun was cocked and aimed at the intruder while he waited for his next move. It came fast. A huge arm raised and started a wide swing at Hornby's head. Dick's .45 blasted the thick silence. The shiny gun protruding from the murderous hand had made a bright target. Bedlam broke loose under the trees. With a howl of pain the shadowy figure whirled and Dick saw the man stiffen. There was a dull thud as the body slid to the ground.

HORNBY, Jason and Doc were on their feet, shouting and stumbling clumsily about. They stared at Dick and his smoking gun, then at the silent form.

"The kid's all right," Doc blurted, "a good guard for us dead-heads!"

"You got him in the head, Langford," Jason stated flatly, staring at Dick speculatively. "What happened? What was he after?"

Dick laughed nervously. "He was aiming at Hornby's head with his gun-butt!"

Hornby's one hand rubbed the stub at his shoulder as he raised from the body. "It's Lon Rooney, one of Moffat's boys," he said and cursed childishly. "Burt Moffat, the skunk, don't mean to split the Stoneman's gold, that's certain; but we'll see about that!"

Doc and Jason began to build a fire. Luke Hornby growled at Dick, "Come on kid, let's find his horse. Did you see what direction he came from?"

Dick was conscious of a strange warmness in Luke Hornby's voice. It amused him. He supposed it was his thanks for saving the cow-rustler's life; perhaps, now, he might be accepted as one of the gang.

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3

ON THE second evening, while the afterglow of sunset was still in the West, the four horsemen rode into the broad acres surrounding the Stoneman's kingdom. Since the sneak attack on Luke Hornby the first night, they had been scanning the brush, watching for trouble and now their vigilance must be doubled. They knew Burt Moffat and his henchmen were stalking the valley.

Dick Langford figured it wasn't circumstances alone that had caused Bill Stone to play his two gangs against each other. But now that Stone was dead, each gang was converging on the land that he had held with an iron hand. They were out to take the wealth that they, themselves, had accumulated for the monarch of outlaws. The ugly pincers of greed and trickery were reaching for the Stone Ranch, where a lone girl waited, defiant, behind thick walls, at the mercy of the wolf-pack relentlessly closing in.

Young Langford looked far out over the rolling fields and watched the stock grazing contentedly. He marveled at the peaceful serenity amidst continous strife and turmoil.

He could just make out the outline of the rambling ranch-house, spreading gracefully on a knoll that emerged from the base of a heavily timbered mountain. The house was like a fortress guarding acres of grazing land falling away, as far as his eyes could see, to the south, east and west.

Doc rode up and halted his horse. Dick was surprised to see flaming wrath in the old face as Doc gestured wordlessly toward the buildings. Langford looked again and beyond the farther wing of the house he could see puffs of smoke from a smouldering fire. Probably the remains of a feed barn; Dick supposed it was this wanton deviltry and destruction that had riled Doc to hot anger.

Hornby and Al Jason came up at an easy lope and gazed silently at the scene before them. Jason's handsome face was streaked with dust and grime. Dick thought Jason looked like nothing but a saintly devil as he pushed his wide brimmed felt backward from his head, while he leaned forward gracefully on his saddle horn.

Jason's eyes slitted calculatingly. "Must be getting plenty warm for that pretty Stone filly," he said; "looks like we're just about in time, eh, Luke?"

"It looks like," Hornby commented tersely, "Burt Moffat and his skunks have been plenty busy!" He heeled his horse to Dick's side and commanded, "Go down there, Langford, scout around and see what you can find out. They've got us outnumbered and we've got to know what we're riding into; you're a stranger to those hombres and if you meet up with any of them you can lie yourself out."

The smirk on his face as he finished speaking caused Dick to wonder. Did Hornby know Dick had lied himself into their midst? But Langford was glad he had been given a specific job to do.

"Watch yourself, lad," Doc whispered; "they're a bad lot down there."

Thankful for the growing darkness, young Langford headed his roan down through the brush aiming for the narrow wooded ravine he saw ahead. He followed a winding cow-path that led into a small grass-grown area surrounded by tall brush, tall enough to hide his horse.

Dismounting, he tethered the roan at a short feeding range and hurried down the trail on foot. He went cautiously, making his way slowly through the dense underbrush. What had seemed like a stone's throw from

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the knoll was a struggle of some fifteen minutes through the thick brush.

IN THE semi-darkness his keen eyes picked up a well-traveled trail that wound like a snake following the little stream. He heard the sharp crack of a shod hoof against a stone and concealed himself in a cluster of young tamarisks where the trail turned toward the bank of the stream. He had not long to wait before he caught the sound of approaching riders. His body tensed as two riders emerged from a bend in the trail. Unsuspectingly, they were jogging along at a comfortable pace and talking in loud voices.

The rider nearest Dick was the largest man he had ever seen on a horse. He was a graceful rider, rode like he spent his life in the saddle. His torso completely hid the other rider from Dick's view, but Langford was surprised at the screened rider's sharp, grating voice, as he said, "You never did keep your promise, Moffat; why should I trust you now?"

Dick thrilled at his luck. Burt Moffat, himself! The big man was Moffat. No wonder he was feared throughout Tohay Valley. He thought of the one-armed, sick-looking Luke Hornby and had to admire his courage in coming here, to wrest his self-declared right of the Stoneman's wealth from the huge cowman.

The riders were directly opposite Langford now and he waited breathlessly for Moffat to speak before they were out of his hearing.

"I ain't asking you to trust me, Bisbee," Moffat flung out. "I'm telling you I'm going in that house at sun-up tomorrow. If you're with me, you share the gold. I don't need you; I'm just giving you a chance. Suit yourself!"

So the second rider was Owl Bisbee, boss of the round-up gang. Dick smiled grimly, his expression thoughtful; he had certainly seen and learned a lot in a few minutes. Remaining motionless until the riders disappeared around a sharp bend of the stream, he headed back through the brush.

As Langford hurried along, grave thoughts raced through his mind. He knew Luke Hornby would act fast when he learned Moffat and Bisbee were planning to grab the loot at dawn.

He thought of Juleen Stone waiting for dawn, with only the old Mexican family and their son, and a handful of riders to protect her from the murderous hordes outside. He supposed there was not one man among those outlaws who slithered about in the darkness that held a spark of sympathy for the girl.

His mind turned to the Doc. Could there possibly be a bit of sympathy in Doc's old heart for the girl? Dick remembered the surliness of the man when Al Jason had made slurring remarks about her. His body warmed with a ray of hope. Perhaps, in what seemed a hopeless effort to save the girl—Langford had made up his mind to help her—he might get some assistance from the old man. Dick knew his effort would have to be one of strategy, pitted against selfish greed.

AS YOUNG Langford surmised, Hornby, Jason and Doc were pleased with his luck down on the trail by the stream.

"Both of those gents are smart," declared Luke Hornby, "and I don't know which hates the other most. But I'm layin' it two to one that Moffat gets Owl Bisbee in the back."

"Don't know about that," answered Jason; "Bisbee's plenty quick on the trigger."

Hornby scowled and shrugged his armless shoulder. "It's up to us to outsmart those skunks." He motioned for them to come closer as he went on, "Now this is what we'll do. We'll keep out of sight. Circle the hill yonder and go in back of the house; camp there in that clump of cotton-woods till midnight. Then we'll get in, grab the

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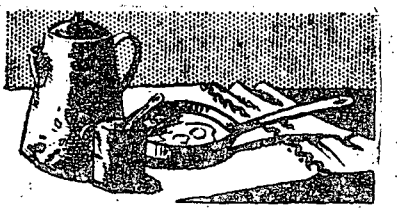
gold and the papers and be miles away by sun-up."

Al Jason drawled laconically, "Now, Luke, you wouldn't leave that innocent girl to the mercy of those badmen, would you?"

Doc stalked over in front of Jason and ranted out, "If you think you're going to get your smutty hands on Juleen Stone, git it out of your mind, Jason!"

"Why, you old hootowl!" sneered Jason. "I ought to wring your stringy neck. If I want that girl, I'll take her!" His handsome face was ugly now and his eyes snapped dangerously.



Hornby smirked as he stepped up and eyed Doc. "Maybe the old man ain't as old as we've been thinkin', Jason." He stood silent a moment, his eyes hard. "I want you all to know right now there'll be no fighting over that little worthless female," he stormed. "There's more important things. You boys wouldn't want Burt Moffat or Owl Bisbee to get hold of that file of papers the Stoneman kept so carefully, would you?" He looked from one to the other while they stared at him sullenly, then went on. "Well, *I* wouldn't. I'm going to take my share of that gold and hit the trail. I thought you boys had the same mind."

"I'm thinking like you, Luke," Jason said, a smile on his handsome face. "But with the gold and that girl, too, settling down in other parts wouldn't be so hard. I wouldn't get homesick for the Valley, that is."

Dick listened to the fast exchange of words with rising hopes. Doc was going to be on his side, and maybe the two together could find a way to save the whole ranch from being looted, burned, and the girl harmed. He strove to catch Doc's eye, but the old shoulders sagged as he turned to stare toward the ranch house, his jaws set stubbornly.

They rode north through the buckthorn, circling down to pick up the trail along the same stream where Dick had seen their enemies, then followed the trail into the hills that lay back of the ranch house. Langford saw it was a wise move of Hornby's. Back here there was no sign of life and they could go their way unchallenged.

HORNBY chose the spot where they would camp. Al Jason brought sticks and several small pieces of wood to build a hooded fire. Doc hunkered over to one side, seemingly deep in thought. Dick got out the provisions, but missed none of the chance remarks from Hornby and Jason.

Al Jason was talkative now. "I figure if we can get in the house we'll make short work of the Mexican and his kid," he said.

"Don't forget that girl," Hornby reminded him. "She knows how to handle a six-shooter even if she did get her book-learning in the city."

"I only laid eyes on her once; she seemed like the weak-spined kind to me," Jason argued. "But I hear she growed into a mighty good-looking woman."

"Sometimes those weak-looking ones fool you. She was mighty soft where her pop was concerned and she's going to put up a good fight."

"Well, don't worry," smirked Jason. "I'll take care of the Stoneman's pride and joy the first thing I do."

Young Langford saw Doc raise from his squatting position, fire in his eyes. Dick quickly stepped up and made some meaningless remark to the old man. Doc stared at Dick, not answering, but the fire went out of his eyes as together they walked to the camp fire and joined the others preparing to eat.

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They dawdled over their supper, then sprawled around, impatient for time to pass. After what seemed to Langford like an endless silence Hornby spoke. "Listen, gents! I've been figuring this thing out. It'll cause less suspicion if Langford, here, indians up to the house and talks to the girl through one of those shootin' slits the Stoneman put in the wall of the main wing of the house..."

"Why Langford?" Jason flared up.

Hornby ignored him and went on, "He can lie us into the house in some fashion and once we're in, the place is ours. We can get what we want, pick up our horses right here and be safe in the hills before those skunks know we're about."

An amused expression crossed Dick's face. Again Hornby was playing on his ability to lie. *But there's another reason why he wants me to take the chance,* he thought. It was a chance, surely, for Moffat and Bisbee must have the place watched. Hornby didn't care if Dick was shot full of holes, but he didn't want to lose one of his henchmen.

But this might be his chance to help the girl. He jumped to his feet eager to start. At least, it was a chance for him to be in the house first, without the three outlaws. Maybe he could get at that safe, too. Certainly, he concluded, this was the time for strategy.

He caught Doc's eye and gave him a look of encouragement. The old eyes stared back at him expressively. To Dick, they seemed to say, *"You're going to have a chance to help Juleen, lad. Do the best you can with it."* Langford wondered anew at Doc's feeling of sympathy for the girl; he didn't understand the old outlaw.

Al Jason stamped around, kicking the ground with his boots, plainly showing his dislike of the arrangement. Dick grinned triumphantly in the darkness. He straightened his shoulders and stood listening, while the night turned into an inky black and the tenseness of the killer hordes seemed to pass into peaceful rest. He knew that one false step, one unpremediated move, would throw the Stone ranch into a hell on earth. It seemed like hours that he waited and watched.

Finally, Luke Hornby said, "All right, Langford! Go on! You know how to lie, so lie like hell. Tell her anything, but get us all in there!"

Dick saw a hardening shadow cross the pale face and knew he wasn't finished. "We'll be waitin' down by the corral, so don't try anything!" Hornby barked.

4

AS YOUNG Langford headed for the sprawling house, a silence of death seemed to settle on the valley. The only sound was the weird chirping of the crickets; fireflies made tiny dots in the eerie darkness. But Dick knew the moment of peace was transient and at any second death would stalk Tohay Valley again.

Dick acknowledged to himself that Luke Hornby had been clever in bringing them safely in without any of Moffat's or Bisbee's men seeing them. But he knew it was pushing luck too far to hope to get into the house and away without arousing somebody.

He slid silently past the corrals, keeping constant watch for a lookout. Sprinting to a large flowering cactus in the patio, he squatted down to take reconnaissance of the house and grounds. He figured the room with the gunsights in the wall would be around the corner to the right of him.

As Dick's eyes became adjusted to the deep shadows outlining the thick, fortress-like walls, he made out a heavy Spanish-type door, built in two

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sections, the upper half to open separately from the lower half.

As the quietness settled around him, his eyes focused on the door. For a second he thought his mind was playing him tricks; the lower section of the door seemed to be slowly moving inward. Then he saw a bulky form that stooped low and became part of the shadow. Someone else had the same idea Luke Hornby had had. Dick's hand started to his gun, but he hesitated; he knew he couldn't use it because all around him men were waiting for just such a signal. No doubt this man had a confederate waiting. He raised his bootheels from the ground, balanced his weight on his toes, ready to spring.

With a faint squeak of the heavy iron hinge, the shadow disappeared. Dick was at the door before the intruder had straightened up. He crouched low under the closed section of the door and listened. The shadow was tiptoeing into what seemed like a long tunnel of inky blackness.

Dick's mind was whirling. Should he tackle the man now or should he follow him? He decided to follow, for the fellow seemed to know where he was going and Langford did not know which way to start in the labyrinth of passages. Groping his way along the wall, he realized the figure in front of him was walking carefully, but surely, as a blind man walks in the darkness.

It was hard for Dick to breathe. He felt as if a permanent hush had settled down, smothering him. He repressed a shiver as he slipped along behind the slow whispering steps. Suddenly, a dim light appeared ahead, as if they were emerging from a tunnel. Dick stopped; he saw the shadowy form hesitating in what looked like an open doorway, then it vanished. Quickly Langford stepped to the edge of the darkness. The tunnel-like hallway opened onto a circular patio, from which, he reasoned, every hall in the house must emerge.

He watched the figure move to a heavily shuttered window through which several tiny rays of light shown dimly. The man stood for a few seconds peering through the narrow cracks, then glided to a door that was an exact duplicate of the one they had just come through.

Young Langford saw the moving figure stoop and begin to work with the complicated heavy iron lock on the door. Dick was irked with impatience while he waited. Mixed emotions went through him as he crouched there. This wasn't a friend of the girl and he was thankful his own arrival had been timed so well. And the further the man went inside the walls, the safer it would be for Dick to use his gun. The man was intent on what he was doing, neither looking to the right nor left; he had no suspicion that he was being followed.

FINALLY, the figure straightened and stood for a minute as if listening, then gently pushed the door inward. Dick dashed across the wide patio as the man disappeared through the door. He remained stooped just inside the door until he could get his bearings. This was a short hall and the door opening from the lighted room must be near. As Dick's eyes became accustomed again to the darkness he saw a faint light a few feet away and the shadowy form stood with his ear pressed to the door-jamb. The man moved surprisingly fast. He threw the door open wide and silently surveyed the room, a gun in his hand.

While he waited for the man's next move, Dick studied the medium-sized figure. He was dressed entirely in black. Young Langford realized this was the reason he had been so hard to identify in the darkness outside the building. A short-clipped mustache covered the thin upper lip and there was an arrogance in the tilt of his chin.

Dick's ears caught the sound of a sliding chair and a woman's frightened gasp. The man strode out of sight in

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the room. "Stay just as you are, all of you!" he shouted pompously; "don't move and you won't get hurt!"

Free to move so he could get a view of the room, Dick glided along the wall in the shadow, his gun in his hand.

A young girl, whom Dick supposed to be Juleen Stone, sat tense and rigid in a stiff looking high-backed chair. Fright mixed with bewilderment filled her face. Her eyes widened with sudden recognition.

"Jack Deming!" she exclaimed; "...that gun, why?"

Langford sensed a gloating sneer in the voice as he answered, "Why? My pretty Juleen asks. I come like this because I'm not welcome to come as other men do, through your front door in the daylight—like young Herb Knowles could!" He paused dramatically. The girl started from the chair, opened her mouth to speak, but he motioned threateningly with his gun and went on, "So, that is why, my dear, I come in the darkness with a gun!"

Anger and horror was in her face as she stared at him speechless. "Herb Knowles...?" she gasped, finally. "It must have been you...it *was* you who ambushed young Knowles...and because of that my father was killed. Get out you...you..."

"Don't move, Pereda!" Deming barked out, "or you'll get a bullet through your head!"

Dick had not noticed the two figures standing back in the shadows by the wall. The old Mexican and his son had been watching through the gun sights when Deming entered. Langford saw this was the wing Luke Hornby had spoken of.

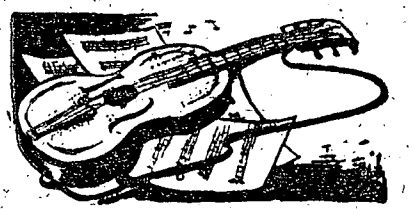
The Mexican boy was younger than Dick had hoped. Wouldn't be much good in a fight. Dick's eyes lit with sudden interest as he saw a large old-fashioned safe far back in the corner of the room.

"Do as he says, Jose," Juleen said frantically to the old man; "this killer won't hesitate to shoot!"

"You're wrong, Juleen, to blame me for your father's death." His voice was almost pleading now. "Your father had lots of enemies...and no one is sure who killed him."

"I do know who killed him!" she blazed. "Herb Knowles killed him because he thought my father had had his son shot to death. There's no one to blame for my father's death but you, Deming. I've never liked you, but now I hate you..."

"You hate me like you loved young Knowles; isn't that right?" Deming broke in.



"Oh, you fool," she cried, "I never loved Herb. He was a good friend of both my father and myself. But..." she hesitated, lowered her voice and stark hatred flashed from her blue eyes, "I did love my father and if it's the last thing I do, I'll make you pay for what you've done!"

DICK WAS remembering the futile despair in the father of the slain Herb Knowles, back there on the Rimrock, as the old man set out on his endless flight from sorrow and guilt. Somehow Langford couldn't believe it had been a bullet from this egotistical man's gun that had started the tragic onrush of death cascading through Tohay Valley.

"You think you hate me, Juleen," Deming was saying, "only because you are blaming me for your father's death, but you'll find out you were wrong. I have come to help you. Your own riders have turned traitor and are planning on storming the house at sun-up and I'm going to take you away—where you'll be safe."

The girl raised from the chair, her eyes stormy. "You're not taking me anyplace, Deming! I'm safer here than

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I would be with you. Now, if you'll please go!"

"I'm not going without you, Juleen; I'm not leaving you here for those skunks out there." He started slowly toward her, adding menacingly. "It would be better if you went willingly, but willing or not, you're going!"

The girl darted back toward Jose Pereda who suddenly had a gun in his hand. They both dropped down behind a long massive table placed about twenty feet from the wall. The young boy leaped like a deer behind a long drape hanging at the side of the room. Dick marveled at the smartness of the kid. Perhaps he would be worth more than he had thought.

Dick was in the door now, his gun pointed at Deming's back. "Drop your gun, Mister!" he barked. He saw the slender body grow rigid as he left the door.

In two long strides he was at Deming's back. "Drop your gun!" he ordered sharply. The pistol thumped on the carpeted floor. "Now turn around!" Langford stepped back and saw the man was wearing a second gun. He motioned and Deming slipped the gun from the holster and it dropped beside the other.

Cautiously, Dick glanced at the girl and the old Mexican. There was relief in Juleen's face, yet she seemed fearful. But naturally, he thought, she would suppose he was another enemy, there to rob her.

He smiled kindly as he said, "I'm Dick Langford, Miss Stone. I rode in with Luke Hornby, Al Jason and Doc. I—I know you're in trouble and I want to help you."

She stared at him silently, looking him up and down. He could see a flicker of hope come to her eyes. He knew she wanted desperately to believe him.

PEREDA, the Mexican, took a step toward him and Dick looked straight into his eyes, praying the man would judge him correctly. He saw the tense jawbones relax and he thought a softness spread over the hard face.

"Senor," he said, "I believe you would like to help us, but Luke Hornby wouldn't be sending you to help us, I think not."

"You're right, Pereda. Hornby didn't send me to help; he sent me to get the lay of the land, so he could come in behind me and loot the safe."

A gasp escaped from the girl and her eyes were wide. "But there's nothing in the safe!" she said.

"Well, wherever your money is," Dick said, keeping his voice low, "they intend to find it."

"But there is no money. Don't you understand? My father left no money!"

Dick looked into the frank, troubled eyes and believed her. But he knew the cowmen and rustlers milling around outside would not. "But they think there's money here and we could never convince them differently," he explained; "they won't listen to reason."

"Go back and tell them that they'll never enter my father's house. I have guns, ammunition and food, we'll stand them off. You tell them that!"

"I'm not going back," Langford stated positively; "I'm not one of them. My place is here, helping you people."

Out of the corner of his eye Dick noticed the unarmed Deming shifting his feet anxiously. He turned facing him, as Deming blurted out, "I came to take Juleen away. I told her Burt Moffat and the boys were planning to storm the house in the morning. But she refused to go. She shouldn't stay here, Langford; you know that."

Dick was forced to admit to himself, the fellow seemed sincere. He believed Deming was actually thinking of the girl's welfare, and perhaps the arrogant cowboy would augment their weak ranks. His mind was busy as Deming continued, "There's still time,

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I know the trails. I can get her safely out of danger."

"I'm not leaving this house," Juleen cried, hotly.

Dick knew it would be best for her not to be on the ranch; but on the other hand, he knew how she felt toward Deming. And he knew they were only wasting words and time, for he was sure the girl would not leave the house alive if she could help it.

5

JACK DEMING stood staring at Juleen and the fire in his slitted eyes slowly diminished. His body relaxed resignedly.

Dick looked at the girl and her pale face, framed by her lustrous black hair, seemed to emit a glowing radiance. He thought she was the prettiest woman he had ever seen; he did not blame Deming for loving her.

"I won't join those skunks out there, Juleen," said Deming. "Won't you let me stay here and do what I can to help you? Regardless of what you think, I liked your father very much."

As he stopped speaking, his gaze turned from the girl to Dick, who still held his gun on him. Dick felt an urge to accept Deming's offer, for they would need all the help they could get, but remembered it was up to Juleen Stone, the mistress of the house. He glanced at her and found her looking at him anxiously, as if she were depending on him for guidance. Had she accepted him, a stranger, as a friend? With growing confidence, Dick turned to Deming and lowered his gun.

"That's a decent gesture, Deming," Langford said as he holstered his gun. "We'll need all the help we can get." Then he stooped, picked up the two colts on the floor and handed them to Deming.

A slight movement of the heavy drape on the opposite wall attracted Dick's attention. His mind flashed to the open door through which he and Jack Deming had entered the house. His hand slipped to his hip as he strode stealthily across the room. He drew his gun and with a quick jerk parted the drape. The twelve year old Mexican stood holding a large colt .44, his finger on the trigger, his eyes like large pearl buttons in his small face.

Dick conquered the urge to laugh, both from relief and the seriousness of the youngster.

A hysterical sob escaped Juleen, still standing rigid by her chair. "Manuel!" she gasped.

Dick holstered his gun again and held out his hand to the boy. "Glad to know you, Manuel," he said; "I'm Dick Langford here to help you."

Manuel was looking at Juleen as he awkardly transferred the .44 to his left hand and put his small thin hand in Dick's. An embarrassed grin started at the corners of his mouth as he turned his large eyes searchingly on Dick.

Time was getting short. Dick sought out Jose Pereda standing quietly by the darkened window and spoke hurriedly to him. "Pereda, the doors Deming and I came through are unlocked. Will you and Deming make the rounds of the house and bolt each door securely?" He glanced at Deming as he went on. "Deming had no trouble opening the doors and you'll have to reinforce them in some way. Better go quickly," he ended tersely, "you one way and Deming another."

His mind went to Doc, out there waiting and wondering. If he could only get the old fellow inside the ranch house—but he could think of no way. It would be foolish to risk going out after him. There would be gun-play; then bedlam would break loose and their chance of defending themselves would be lost. No, he would go on, do the best he could with the seemingly hopeless job before him.

Juleen and Manuel were standing together, the girl's arm hugging the

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boy tightly. It pained Dick to see the anxiety in her eyes. She seemed more worried for the safety of the Mexican family than for her own safety. He suddenly realized he had not seen the boy's mother. But at that moment he heard the girl say, "Where's Rosita, Manuel?"

"She went in the chapel a long time ago," he answered, turning his eyes toward a door leading from the room.

Juleen went hurriedly to the door, her face full of concern. She pulled the door open and stood looking through. Dick saw the soft glow of candles and moved closer. Before a small shrine a motherly looking woman knelt with a rosary in her hand. The room was small with only the one door and a small narrow window near the ceiling. He drew in his breath sharply—somehow he had not expected to find a room in the Stoneman's house built especially for a chapel.

YOUNG Langford could not define the emotions that surged through him. It had been years since he had been inside a church, not since he was a child. He had not had revenge and murder in his heart then. He had changed, but his God had not. His God was still there watching and waiting. Waiting? Waiting for what? For Dick Langford to succeed in the evil he had sworn to do, believing it would erase the crime he had witnessed so long ago? He shrugged in confusion as the woman sensed their presence and raised stiffly from her kneeling position. She came toward them, slipping her rosary into the deep pocket on her skirt.

Dick looked at the frank, round face with its kind eyes and marveled at the absence of the hopelessness he saw in the other faces and which he, himself, felt. The older woman welcomed young Langford with gentle frankness and went quickly through the door across the room, saying simply that she was going to draw much water, in case they might need it.

"The ammunition and guns are in the room directly opposite," Juleen said to Dick, pointing across the corridor. "Perhaps we should start bringing them in here."

Dick thought it was a good idea to fortify themselves in the room that Bill Stone had built for just such a purpose, and, too, the room faced the out buildings, from which direction the men would likely attack.

As he followed the girl he heard loud voices in the patio and ran down the hall. From the doorway he saw two figures with their arms upraised, Pereda advancing on them with drawn gun. Dick rushed out, his hand going toward his holster, when he heard a familiar voice rant out: "Damn you, Pereda! I tell you I ain't lying. Luke Hornby is unconscious and tied up out by the corral. I'm here to help Bill Stone's daughter fight off them skunks. And this here's Al Jason; you know him. I had to bring him along; I couldn't risk stirring up that nest of rattlers by putting a bullet through his head."

"Doc!" Langford cried out, relief in his voice. Then to the Mexican, "Let him go, Pereda. He's all right."

Dick wondered how the old outlaw managed to get the best of the slick Hornby with Al Jason there, too. Undoubtedly the sly old fellow had used his head and pulled a trick. But it didn't matter how he did it. The main thing was that he was safe in the house and would be another on their side. They could use many more. He wondered where Juleen Stone's cowhands were.

DICK CATALOGUED his small army; two women, one twelve year old kid, two old men and two hombres that might be depended on to fight the cowmen with the reward of the girl in view. That could mean serious trouble within their small ranks, but he wouldn't think of that now. He would meet that when it came.

Al Jason, his arms still upraised, glared at Dick, hatred in his beady

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eyes. "So, Luke was right! You are a double-crossing rat," he snarled. "I thought you and Doc had your heads together a lot out on the trail. Planned how you'd get the gold and the girl too, didn't you? But I—"

Langford darted forward and his fist crashed into the handsome face. Jason staggered back against the wall, stupid surprise mingled with the hate. But he righted himself quickly and as Dick closed in he rocked Dick's head with a glancing blow. Langford's senses reeled and all his pent up dislike for the slinky Jason welled up as he landed a hard crushing blow on the jutting chin. Jason's knees buckled and he slid down the wall.

Dick looked down at him and realized how badly he had wanted to do that ever since he had gone to their cabin on the Rimrock for help. Now he could define the feeling he had had every time Jason had opened his mouth to speak; he had wanted to smash his fist into the thick lips. He felt good as he rubbed his throbbing hand.

Doc, Pereda and Dick bolted and barred all the doors that opened on the patio, in case the two outer ones opening into the corridors should not withstand the onslaught they expected. Dick then went down the hall to where he could hear Jack Deming still hammering. "This'll hold against an army," Deming said.

"I hope so," Dick said, "there must must be a small army out there. About how many do you think there are, Deming?"

"Somewhere between twenty and thirty, I reckon. But Moffat, the foreman and Owl Bisbee, the round-up boss, are sorta feudin', so they may not all stick together."

"I sure wish that would happen, but I'm afraid it's not likely," Langford reasoned.

"Well, if there actually isn't any gold in the house—" Deming stopped, seeming to want Dick to take it from there.

"I believe the girl's telling the truth," Dick said with conviction, "that there's no gold in the house; but I got it that Luke Hornby wants Stone's papers as much as he wants the gold."

Deming snapped his fingers. "I did hear something about the Stoneman holding over the boys' heads a history of each job they pulled."

Langford glanced curiously at Deming and Deming blustered out, "I'm top bronc-buster here, hombre! If you're thinking I'm a rustling outlaw, you can change your mind quick."

"Okay, I'm glad to change my mind fella," Dick said grinning, "but naturally, I thought you were just another one of those skunks that rode the range, killing and thieving."

"You can change your mind again," Deming snapped. "As long as Bill Stone lived, there was no killing if he could prevent it. And Gawd help the killer if there was a murder and the Stoneman found him out."

Dick's brows raised in surprise. It was the first thing he had heard in Juleen's father's favor.

THE MEN gathered in the large room where they expected to spend a long night. Al Jason slouched in a chair glowering from one to the other, his burning eyes following Juleen lustfully. Watching him, Dick determined to stay awake, not fall asleep as he had the night before out on the trail, even though he had told little Manuel to keep his gun on the surly outlaw.

Juleen and Senora Pereda busied themselves filling the long table with food, pitchers of water and hot coffee. Dick's eyes ran greedily over the table, lighting on the steaming crock of chili. He was suddenly aware of a ravenous hunger for a woman's cooking.

The night wore on slowly. The only light in the entire house came from the moonlight filtering through the slits in the side of the building.

During the darkest interval, when the moon had set and dawn had not yet appeared, a shot rang out. The

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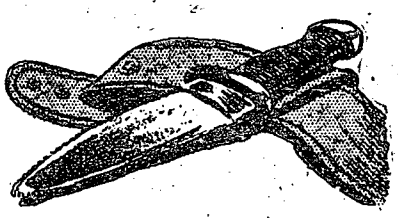
bullet spattering against the thick wall sounded like a cannon in the quiet room. The men sprang to their stations by the narrow openings. Al Jason too, sprang forward, but Dick pushed him roughly back in the chair and smiled as Manuel came stalking toward the outlaw, his big gun pointing at Jason's heart. They wouldn't have to worry about Jason, Dick mused.

Juleen and Senora Rosita hurried from the adjoining room and took their positions by the wall with the men. As more and more shots were fired Dick knew the entire ranch had come alive and the battle for the Stoneman's gold was on.

The onslaught was terrific and even though the walls of the house were so thick they seemed impregnable, they shook under the furious fire. Men screamed and cursed as they fell wounded and men died out there in their man-made hell.



Smoke began to fill the room and Dick heard Juleen Stone cough. She had moved near him. His pulse throbbed when he discovered she had chozen to be near him. He was fired with a wild desire to kill every man out there with his own guns; mad outlaws of the range, with the lust for gold in their minds.

His .45s were jerking steadily. He repressed the urge to shout hilariously when his straining eyes would see a man stumble and fall and he knew he had scored a hit. He heard Doc cursing and stomping about as he loaded and reloaded his guns. Daylight was fast approaching and the figures were now recognizable to the small besieged group.

Young Langford whirled. Jack Deming was yelling out through one of the openings, "Bisbee," he called, "Owl Bisbee!"

PUZZLED, Dick darted to Deming. Deming's rifle was sticking through the slit with a white handkerchief tied to the barrel. Hot anger flared up in Dick. What was Deming up to? He had no right to speak for the rest of them—for Juleen. Langford lunged at him, grabbing his arm and jerked the gun back into the room. Deming spun Dick around and thrust the gun back through the wall.

"Wait! I know what I'm doing," he said, his face cunning.

The gunfire almost stopped and out of the turmoil Owl Bisbee's sharp voice answered, "What do you want? Ready to surrender?"

"No, damn your hide, Bisbee," hollered Deming; "I've got some information for you."

Bisbee recognized the bronc-buster. "What're you doin' in there, Deming?" he snarled. "I'll get your hide for this, you double crossin' horse-wrangler! But go ahead," Bisbee sneered, "I'm waitin' for the information."

"How'd you like to know who really killed your black Morgan, Bisbee?"

"I know who killed my horse, and I shot the skunk, just like he got my black Morgan," he bellowed. "Is that all you got to say?"

"I've got a lot more to say, but first—Herb Knowles didn't shoot your horse, Bisbee. Ask Burt Moffat what he buried under the big oak down in the gulch. Ask him why you never found your silver saddle and bridle. Herb Knowles didn't have 'em, did he, Owl? No! You're damn right he didn't."

Deming paused for breath, then rushed on, "And that ain't all, Bisbee. How would you like to know the name of the rattler who squealed on you that time the law had you bottled up in Ta Junga Canyon and damned near wrecked your gang? How about it Bisbee? Would you like to know his name?"

As this verbal fencing bout went on, Dick Langford could hear the belabored breathing of the girl beside him. He could see the men outside

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standing rigid, listening tensely. He sought out the large figure of Burt Moffat. Moffat had gradually turned, was bringing his gun barrel level with Bisbee's head.

"By Gawd," yelled Bisbee, "I've always hated your guts, Jack Deming, but if you know that snake's name—but I think you're bluffing, you buzzard."

"You know I'm not bluffing, Bisbee," came Deming's voice with a note of finality in it. "It was—"

Burt Moffat's gun roared. As quick as a flash he pulled the trigger, drilling Owl Bisbee in the head; he had shot Bisbee before Deming had spoken the name, mute evidence that Moffat was the traitor.

And now Bisbee's men were remembering all that had happened at Ta Junga Canyon. How many of their gang rotted in jail because the traitor Moffat had squealed—how more of them had died.

Their real purpose in being here was forgotten now.

Pandemonium reigned. The slaughter was barbaric as the battle raged between the Bisbee retainers and the gang which Burt Moffat led.

6

SMOKE was clearing from the barricaded room. Dick looked at the faces around him and saw them gradually relaxing from the strain and tenseness of the long night. A ray of hope seemed to have come with the light of day. They felt safe for a little while.

Juleen Stone was staring at Jack Deming, her face full of self-reproach. She had just heard Deming exonerate himself from the guilt of causing her father's death. Dick could see the struggle going on in her mind, trying to straighten the sordid mess out.

He acknowledged to himself the relief he felt as he heard Deming's conversation with Owl Bisbee. Even with the finger of guilt pointing at the arrogant horse-wrangler, Dick had accepted him as a confederate and now he was glad of his judgment.

The viperous Moffat had been back of it all. He had shot Bisbee's prized horse and had successfully thrown suspicion on young Herb Knowles. In hot-headed fury, Bisbee had shot down young Knowles and the fury had caught on to flare up in the father of young Herb. But young Knowles' father had blamed the Stoneman—blamed him, because his son, Herb, had talked long and loud of his infatuation for Juleen, the Stoneman's daughter. So, the man who had sent death stalking through Tohay Valley was not Jack Deming, but Burt Moffat.

A feeling of desolation crept over Dick Langford as he saw the understanding smiles pass between the girl and the arrogant horse-wrangler. Deming was silently and happily answering her request for forgiveness. Dick scowled at the light in Deming's eyes and he was surprised and a little ashamed, for he knew now that he had wanted to win the favor of the Stoneman's daughter himself. Dick had never known the sensation of jealousy, but he wondered now if this wasn't it. And, certainly, he had no right to be jealous of the girl.

For the first time since he left his aunt's home, Langford was thinking of someone else and their troubles. His own lust for revenge was far back in his mind as he suddenly decided to try to win Juleen for his own. He knew he had little to offer her, but he would work hard, try to make a success of his life, then come back for her—if she would have him.

Surprised at his own thoughts, he grinned self-consciously. Was this the same Dick Langford that had wandered aimlessly, wasting good years of his life, searching for the man who had killed his brother so that he might take the killer's life? The same

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Dick Langford, but of a different mind. He didn't know exactly what had caused the change, but in this house of death, surrounded by hatred and greed, his eyes had been opened. He had a goal, something to fight for, something to work for.

Senora Pereda stood in the door, "Come, Juleen," she said, "we must bring more food for the table."

Dick's eyes turned from the disappearing girl to Doc who was gazing at the battle raging outside. Doc turned and spoke approvingly to Deming. "That," he said, "was what they call strategy, pardner. Pitting one side against the other. But what will happen when those onery devils quit killing each other?"

Jack Deming laughed mirthlessly. "They won't all be dead that's sure, and we'll have to figure a way to take care of the ones that are still living, I reckon."

Wiping the grime and sweat from his face, Dick was brought up sharp by the scraping of a chair across the room. He whirled to see Al Jason in a flying leap land on Manuel, knocking the boy to the floor. Dick heard the air leave Manuel's chest in a loud gasp as the outlaw hit him.

JOSE PEREDA, the boy's father, darted forward, but only to meet the blast of his son's .44 in Jason's hand. Quickly, Dick aimed his own gun at a spot between Jason's shoulder-blades and pulled the trigger; the body of the rustler crashed again on the boy, who was still stunned from the first thud of the big body.

Jack Deming reached the outlaw as Dick stooped to roll the body clear of the boy. "He's dead, 'Langford," Deming stated matter-of-factly, and started for the door dragging the body.

Dick grinned sympathetically at Manuel as the boy drew fast shallow breaths, fighting desperately to keep the tremble out of his young voice, but his eyes were flashing as he stammered, "I... I wish I'd a pulled the trigger when he started for me!" Then Manuel saw Doc lifting his father to the long leather couch and the boy's expression was self-condemning.

Langford followed the boy over and laid a hand on his thin shoulder as they watched Doc's deft old fingers probe for the bullet in the flesh of Pereda's hip.

Doc glanced at Manuel and spoke up quickly. "It's only a flesh-wound, boy. Run ask your mother if she has some whiskey; I'll give your pa a few swigs and he won't know I'm digging for that blasted bullet."

Manuel passed Juleen on the run as she came through the door with a steaming pan of hot water.

Dick left the Doc working with fevered determination and peered through the slits. The smoke was beginning to clear away out there now. Men lay wounded and dead and there were only a few left on their feet. Evidently Owl Bisbee's gang had lost heart without their leader and those that remained alive had fled. Dick could not locate the large figure of Burt Moffat among those that were milling around. Had he also been shot down, he wondered.

With sudden awareness, Langford sniffed the air in the closed room. Alarm spread over his face. Smoke! Not smoke from gun-powder, smoke from burning wood. He sprinted toward the door. Jack Deming looked up, a question on his lips. Dick motioned for silence and gestured for Deming to follow.

"What's wrong?" Deming blurted as they hit the corridor.

"Fire!" Dick said, pointing to a cloud of smoke rolling toward them; "the skunks have set the door on fire!"

They stood for a second staring stupidly at the burning door. The flames were licking through the cracks of the heavy timbers.

"Water, Deming!" Dick barked; "maybe we can hold it back, keep it from burning through."

Both men wheeled and raced for

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the kitchen. Juleen was walking toward the pump, with a water pitcher in her hand.

She looked up startled. "What now?" she asked, stepping back.

Dick grabbed up a large wooden pail and was working the pump furiously. "They've set fire to the door," he said over his shoulder. Then he spoke to Jack Deming, "You'd better warn Doc."

Finally, the pail was nearly full and Dick hurried out the door, holding the cumbersome pail in his arms. The smoke was so dense he had to hug the wall. His eyes were stinging as he lurched blindly toward the burning door. He stopped, his eyes popping. Where the burning door had been there was a large opening. From the left and ahead of him a harsh voice rasped out, "Stand just as you are!" The tone was deadly.

DICK DREW UP sharply, splashing water from the pail. Bitterly he cursed his foolishnesss for leaving the door unguarded. In a flash, he saw what had happened. Moffat, or one of his gang, had rammed the burning door, sending clouds of black smoke pouring into the hall. This made a trap for anyone coming from the other rooms. And young Langford felt like a rat in a trap holding the pail in his arms, making it impossible to reach his guns.

Hearing muffled steps behind him, he realized Jack Deming was walking into the same trap. He must halt those hurrying steps. "Stay back, Deming!" he yelled desperately. But the words hadn't left his lips when a bullet ripped through the wooden pail with terrific force, knocking him back against the wall. His body slumped to the floor, his head hitting the wall with a resounding thump.

He felt like he was floating through the air with hundreds of pounds riding his chest. Then he became conscious of his sopping wet body. The cumbersome pail of water! He had cursed it because it kept him from drawing his gun on his attacker, but it had stopped the force of the bullet. By rights, Langford should be dead; he hoped his attacker would figure that he was.

As he lay struggling to breathe a little deeper with each breath, he could hear Jack Deming being forced back into the room where the others were. His hand found his holsters; he still had his guns.

Alarming sharp pains began to shoot through Langford's chest as he struggled to a sitting position. Beads of sweat broke out on his forehead and body. He could hear a loud blustery voice coming from the room behind him. It sounded like the voice of the big Burt Moffat, and if it were, there would be more men surging through the smouldering doorway.

He clenched his teeth, reached his hands out to the wall and pulled himself to his feet. He leaned there a moment taking short painful breaths, his eyes wild. He tried to think calmly. First, he must send a bullet through Moffat's brain. He would go in through the kitchen; this, he calculated, would place him directly opposite of where Moffat must be standing as he held the group at bay.

He stumbled across the kitchen to the door leading to the fortified room. Standing back in the shadows he peered into the other room. He had guessed right. Juleen, Senora Pereda, and Jack Deming were lined up in front of the long table. Doc was helping the wounded Mexican from the couch to join the others, while Burt Moffat held his gun on them. They had been disarmed. Dick saw their guns piled carelessly on a chair near Moffat.

Young Langford's eyes fastened on Juleen. She was staring belligerently at Burt Moffat. But Dick sensed a frightened despair that he hadn't seen in her face until now.

"Listen, girl!" Moffat exploded, "I'm giving you the last chance to open that safe!"

She fixed him with a wrathful stare, took a step forward and raised small

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clenched fists. "I've told you there's nothing in my father's safe but a letter for me. There never was any gold and he told me long ago to burn his file of papers if anything should happen to him. And I burned them yesterday!"

Dick saw hatred and unbelief on the big rustler's face and knew it had been the girl's last chance to produce the gold for the lustful outlaw. He drew his .45 carefully on the side of Moffat's head. So intent on the thing he was about to do, he didn't hear the stealthy movement beside him. He never knew from what direction the onslaught came when the crushing blow hit the back of his head. As a hand roughly grabbed his shoulder and eased him down in a sprawling position, he heard a deafening roar of a pistol and a strange voice rant out from the other room, "This is the last dirty trick you'll pull, Burt Moffat!"

7

THAT SEEMED to young Langford a long lifetime later, he opened his eyes and stared blankly around the kitchen. He could still hear the roar of the gun and the loud voice. He shook his head and as he did so, his eyes and mind began to focus clearer. The roar left his head, but the voice kept on. He began another struggle to get to his feet. His body hurt now from the top of his head to his toes and he was unable to move a muscle!

He saw his gun lying about three feet away and wondered if he must lie there helpless unable to reach it while he listened to his friends being killed. It looked like it was going to be the ironical finish for him. But from the very beginning his life had been ironical. His happy childhood cut short by the murder of his brother Tom; his wasted years roving the country looking for Tom's murderer; his meeting with the outlaws on the Rimrock and feeling he was near the end of his search and then his meeting Juleen—having a chance to help her—his wanting her. The appeal of her predicament had drawn him at the very first, then the charm of her appearance had caused his amazing surrender to this strange and sentimental feeling for her. But now, he knew he loved her. And he wasn't going to lie here while she was in danger.

He began to bring his knees up slowly. He could have shouted. His muscles were co-ordinating. He tried his arms. They felt as if they didn't belong to him, but they moved! All over his body there was a tingling, a sensation like when he had lain too long on an arm, stopping the circulation.

Shocked to attention, Dick heard Doc say, "No, Luke Hornby, it's no deal! I'm going to stick with these people. Besides, I know you hate my guts and only want to use me to fight Moffat's men, then kill me."

Luke Hornby! His was the loud, strange voice he had heard, along with the roar of the gun! Hornby must have recovered, struggled free from his bonds where Doc had tied him up out by the corral, came in behind Moffat and shot the crafty foreman. With a sudden desperate lurch, Dick was on his knees, reaching for his gun.

"Die with these people, then, you old fool!" shouted Hornby, "you're so almighty righteous—get in the chapel with your friends!"

Langford pulled himself upon his unsteady legs and took short reeling steps to the door. He wondered at the absence of Moffat's men, but he knew they were about, for it must have been one of them that had hit him on the back of his head.

Hornby's eyes lit on Dick as the outlaw whirled from closing the heavy bolt on the chapel door. "You double crossin' skunk," he snarled.

Dick said nothing, but took a few

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halting steps closing the distance beteen them. The outlaw's pasty face turned a shade lighter as he stared at the opening in the barrel of Dick's .45.

Hornby had placed his gun under the stub of his arm as he bolted the door and Langford was wishing he would reach for it. He hated to kill a cripple caught like that. As he stood hesitating, his finger on the trigger, a loud gun blast, from the hall rent the air and Manuel's young voice screamed something unintelligible. Instantly Dick remembered the boy had not been with the others here in the room when Moffat had them lined up in front of the table.

During the second while Langford's attention was diverted, Hornby had his gun in his hand. Dick's finger plunged the trigger back simultaneously with the crash of Hornby's gun. He watched the one-armed outlaw's body stand rigid while his bony face set in a surprised, grotesque look before it toppled toward him.

AS DICK staggered backward to escape the horrible falling body, a searing pain struck his shoulder. Dazed, he looked at the blood spreading on his shirt. The bullet from Hornby's gun had struck him below the shoulder joint. His arm hung useless. Oddly, he felt no pain, but his head felt queer and waves of dizziness were sweeping over him.

Again, he heard Manuel's frightened voice from the hall. He glanced anxiously at the chapel door, but started for the hallway. Dick thrilled at the sight of the Mexican boy holding a smoking gun on a tall man cowering against the wall.

"Good work, Manuel," Dick cried, "he was coming in, eh?"

Manuel turned, relief in his shaky voice as he answered, "No, he was going out! I was hiding in the kitchen behind the stove. I couldn't see what was going on, but I heard two men come in. I just waited and listened. Finally, someone else came in. Then I heard one of them whisper, 'Come on, I've fixed that hombre, let's go out and get what's left of the gang. Moffat's got it all sewed up but killing that bunch of scared coyotes in there,' so I followed them out. I told them to halt, but they wouldn't stop. One got away, but I shot this one."

Dick turned his bleary eyes to the man and saw that his wrist was shattered, his gun on the floor. From the size of the hombre Langford surmised he was the one that had given him the nasty blow on the back of his head while Manuel hid a few feet away behind the stove.

"Good shooting, Manuel!" Dick said warmly. "There's no one but you to watch the door, fella. So stay right there and shoot anybody that tries to come in. I'll be right back."

Dick pushed the wounded man toward the fortified room, hurrying him on to the door of the chapel. He started to holster his gun to lift the latch, but hesitated. It suddenly struck him that he was in exactly the same predicament as Luke Hornby had been—only one hand to hold his gun and lift the heavy bolt. He motioned with his gun for his captive to open the door.

As the door opened, Doc came flying out, his old eyes snapping. He saw the bodies of Burt Moffat and Luke Hornby lying where they had fallen and looked down on them, mumbling, "So you blasted buzzards finally got what was comin' to you!"

When Juleen Stone saw Langford, she cried out, "Oh! We thought you were dead!" Impulsively, she rushed to him, her eyes glowing, then she saw the blood on his shoulder. "You're hurt," she gasped, "terribly hurt!"

Dick's heart was singing. A minute before there had been no feeling in his whole body, but now he was bathed in a soothing warmness. Juleen Stone had been worried about him—she was glad to see him alive—she felt badly that he had been wounded.

He drew a deep breath and a happy giddy feeling began to steal over him. Vaguely he saw Jack Deming walk with lowered head to stare unseeing

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down at the bodies on the floor. Dick couldn't help feeling a little sorry for the arrogant horse-wrangler. He certainly couldn't blame him, or anybody, for loving Juleen; but Juleen Stone would be his—not Jack Deming's—not anybody's girl, but his, Dick Langford's.

THE INDISTINCT figure of Doc was in front of him, looking searchingly into his face. "You need a doctor, boy!" said Doc, as he grasped him firmly by the arm. "Come over here to my office," he said, guiding Dick's faltering steps to the couch.

Langford noticed Senora Pereda wringing her hands, a worried expression on her face. Dick tried to free his arm from Doc's grasp. He had forgotten Manuel!

"Senora Pereda," he called, "Manuel's all right; he's out in the hall guarding the door." Then aside to Doc he said, "I'll be right back, I've got to get the kid."

But Jack Deming started for the door, "Stay here, Langford," he said gruffly, "I'll take over out there."

After Dick's shoulder had been relieved of the bullet and bandaged, Juleen came in from the kitchen where she and Senora Pereda had been busily preparing more food and announced triumphantly, "I'm going to open my father's safe!"

She let her eyes fall on Dick as he leaned forward from the couch expectantly. He thrilled anew at what he saw in them and smiled at her with full understanding. Now, he thought, everyone will know that the Stoneman's daughter has been telling the truth.

Juleen bent over the old fashioned safe, twirled the clumsy dial and shortly pushed the thick door open wide. Dick's heart felt too big for his chest when he saw the empty safe. The girl pulled forward a small tin box and

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She glanced at the letter in her hand and as she read the large writing scrawled across the envelope, a spasm of pain seemed to cross her lips. She lifted her head and continued, "Knowing my father, I'm sure he wrote this letter, hoping that he might be better understood, and I know he would want me to read it to you."

Dick saw Doc leave his straight, high-backed chair and shuffle around nervously. There was a look on his face as if something big were about to happen, something over which he had no control.

Juleen bowed her head over the letter and began to read:

Remember that day long ago, Juleen, when you asked me about my brother? I was ashamed to tell you about him, because I blame myself for his failure in his profession, for ruining his life. He went back to the town where we were born to start his medical practice, but my misfortune of having to kill a man there made it impossible for him to get the kind of practice he should have had. Only outlaws and crooks would patronize him. Naturally, he blamed me and when he, through his practice, finally became involved with the law, turned bitter and joined the outlaws.

Harboring a bitter hatred for me, he later came south and joined my men in order to punish me by letting me see what I had done to him. And he let me

[Turn To Page 92]

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know he didn't want to be known as my brother. He still despised my scheme of using the gold stolen by the outlaws to build an institution for the people ruined by the murderers and thieves; he called it madness when I chose to avenge the murder of our parents by fiendish rustlers.

He is called Doc, Juleen, and he rides with Luke Hornby—

JULEEN LOOKED up, her lips parted. Her round eyes sought Doc, who glanced at her and quickly away, unsure of himself.

"Doc, she cried, "you're Phil Stone, my father's brother—my uncle!" She ended with a laughing sob.

Young Langford watched a self-conscious grin spread over Doc's lined, weathered face. His shoulders raised. He seemed suddenly taller to Dick as Juleen kept on: "Oh, I'm glad to find you. I knew I had an uncle Phil somewhere, but I never dreamed—" She hurried to Doc and flung her arms around him, pinning his arms to his sides. Doc chuckled, embarrassed, but his eyes were shining as he dropped his face caressingly on her hair.

"Juleen, my girl," he said at last, "your uncle has been an awful fool and your father must have hated me like I used to think I hated him—"

"No—No!" she broke in, "Father didn't hate you— I know he didn't. Wait! Let's see what the rest of his letter says." She was blinking back the tears as she started to read again:

I'm telling you who he is, hoping that after I'm gone, you will find a way to convince him that he was successful in hurting me—for I loved him dearly and will rightly carry the burden of guilt to my grave. My last wish will be that you may learn to love him as you have me, with the hope that your love might make up for the thing I did to him.

Now, about the ranch—you

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THE STONEMAN OF TOHAY VALLEY

must use your own judgment. But as a suggestion, you can turn the institution over to the county, sell the ranch and go to the city where you can live the life you deserve.

Dick felt overcome with sympathy for Doc as he watched a tear slip down a crevice in the old fellow's cheek. Dick, himself, was blinking fast.

"Are you going to leave the ranch, Juleen?" Manuel asked, his voice cracking.

"No! I'm not going away, Manuel. I'm going to stay here, run the ranch with honest men and keep up the project my father devoted his life to."

"Good girl!" Doc exclaimed, "I thought you would!"

Juleen smiled at her uncle, her eyes glowing. "Will you help me, uncle—Phil?" she asked, her voice husky.

Doc looked around, a sly grin on his face. "Well," he said, "it's like this—I don't know how I'm going to like taking orders from that young rascal there." Chuckling, he pointed to young Langford.

Dick felt his face burning and had an urge to shake the breath from the old fellow. He stole a glance at Juleen. She was blushing too, but her eyes were shining.

There was a happy smile on Senora Pereda's round face as she went to stand by her husband who was guarding the wounded cow-hand. Jose was looking from Juleen to Dick, grinning.

Doc's face became serious and he spoke gravely to Dick. "If you still want what you were searching for in the cabin up on the Rimrock, son, it's on the watch chain on Luke Hornby's body."

[*Turn Page*]

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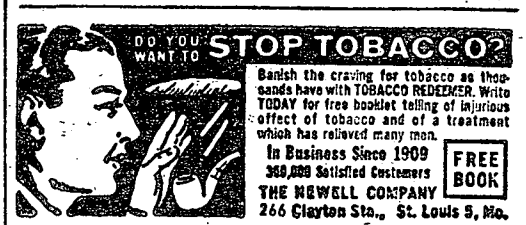
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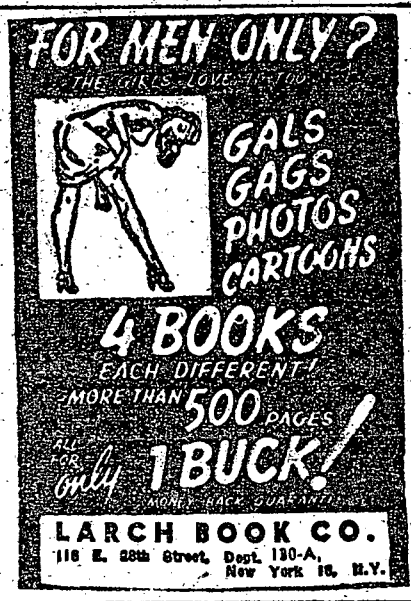

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Dick looked up, startled.

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A grateful sense of well being came to Dick Langford. It seemed like a long time since he had given any thought to his quest for the nugget ring. Absorbed in someone else's troubles, he had lost his urge for revenge.

He looked at Juleen Stone and knew he wanted nothing more than to take her small hand in his and walk from that house of death into the bright sunshine...

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By J. J. Mathews

WHEN Captain Bonneville and his party were on an exploration trip that was going to do much to open up the West, they reached a fork of the Nebraska which divided itself into two equal and beautiful streams. Along one branch was the route to the Comanche and Kioway Indians and to the Northern Mexican settlements. Of the other branch the men knew nothing. It was impossible to cross because of quicksands, so for two days the party continued along the south fork trying to find a safe fording place.

Finally the resourceful captain decided to turn his wagons into boats. The wheels were removed and the wagon bodies covered with buffalo hides. Over this went a smearing of tallow and ashes. Three men in each "boat" took care of it while in the water. Thus they managed to get all their effects across the stream. And it was well worth the effort for they soon found themselves in good buffalo country.

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THE CHIEF PLAYS CHESS

[*Continued From Page* 63]

stage station and the surrounding territory. Death had been swift for the telegraph operator and the four men who were in charge of the horses. For, this time, Cunning Fox was too busy to indulge in torture; he was playing for high stakes, to wipe out a group of Amerian soldiers.

Apple Creek was a deep bed, generally dry, some sixty feet wide, with high, almost-perpendicular banks. The stage crossed it by a bridge. Cunning Fox's were drawn up about one hundred yards from the eastern end of this bridge, directly facing it. The right flank, which might be turned, was protected by eight or ten dismounted Indians posted in the loop-holed stable of the stage station. As Major Perry and his men came within sighting distance, Cunning Fox felt that the advancing force was United States Cavalry, because the scouts all wore uniform coats. His plan was to permit them partially to cross the bridge, and then by a vigorous onslaught—accompanied by the usual yells and shaking of buffalo robes—to frighten the restive and half-broken cavalry horses. This would render them unmanageable and thus throw the whole force into confusion in a most difficult and dangerous position. The rest would be easy—counting coups and scalps.

Major Perry had no doubt that his scouts would hold their own in any kind of fighting, but he was startled as Chief Big Nose shouted a strange order, "Take coats off, throw on shoulder, button top button."

Cunning Fox mounted a cream colored pony and held a rifle in his right hand. His hair was parted without a plume; his broad face with a short nose and wide jaws was destitute of paint. His fierce, half bloodshot eyes gleamed from under heavy brows. His body was practically naked. *Yes*, he thought to himself, *these soldiers are walking into my trap.*

[*Turn To Page* 98]

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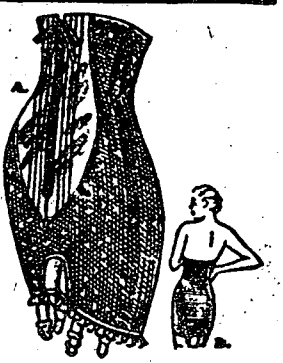

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★ THE CHIEF PLAYS CHESS ★

[*Continued From Page 96*]

The scouts advanced by the flank left in front. As soon as the leading files passed the bridge they inclined rapidly to the left, to enable those in the rear to come up promptly into line. When nearly half the company had passed, the renegades charged with Cunning Fox in the lead.

As the two groups almost approached, Chief Big Nose shouted to his men, "Coats off." In a flash, each scout unbuttoned his coat, and picked out an enemy. The coat was thrown over the horse's face so as to confuse him. The renegades became upset when they saw they were fighting trained Indian scouts. The leading group of Chief Big Nose's scouts fought with revolver in one hand, scalping knife in the other.

Major Perry and his half of the scouts fired with repeating rifles after the fleeing Indians. Chief Big Nose saw his mortal enemy and threw himself upon him. Both fell to the ground, with Cunning Fox on top, about to club Chief Big Nose with the butt of his rifle. Major Perry levelled his rifle, fired once, and Cunning Fox was no longer to be counted among the living on this earth; the scalping knife did a quick and accurate job.

The remaining Indians in the stable fought until their ammuniton ran out, then the door was battered down and they became the vanquished. It wasn't a pleasant sight, watching the scalping, but Major Perry knew how much this victory meant to his scouts.

For many, there were two days of feasting at the Fort.

General Crimbley was lavish in his praise. "Major Perry, I guess Washington will have to strike off a medal in your honor for this victory." But the Major had no false sense of pride. He explained Chief Big Nose's stratagem in winning the fight.

And then a puzzled Major and General asked the same question, "Where did you get the idea of fooling Cunning Fox by making him think your men were cavalry soldiers?"

Chief Big Nose pulled himself to his full dignity. His answer took some time to give because it required the use of English words which did not have suitable Pawnee words as counterparts. "I learn from game of chess. Let Cunning Fox think knights are pawns. He not so cunning; knights are Pawnee—good fighters."

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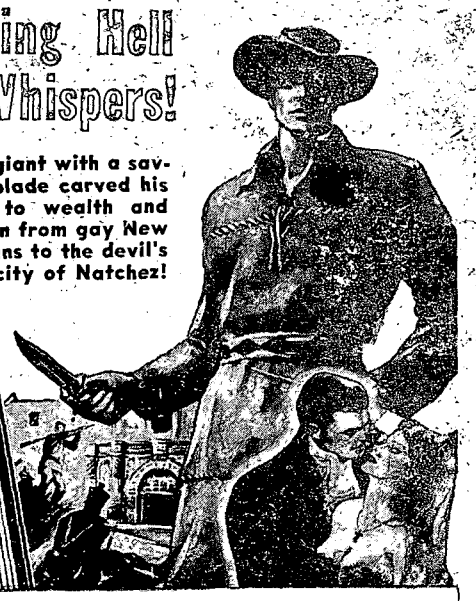

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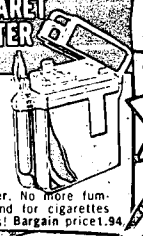

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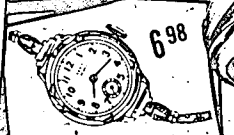

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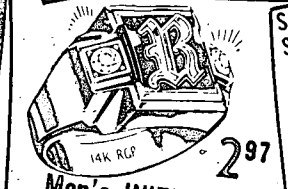

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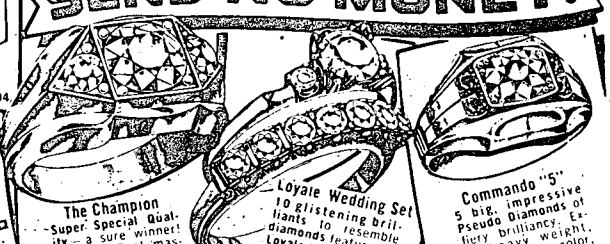

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